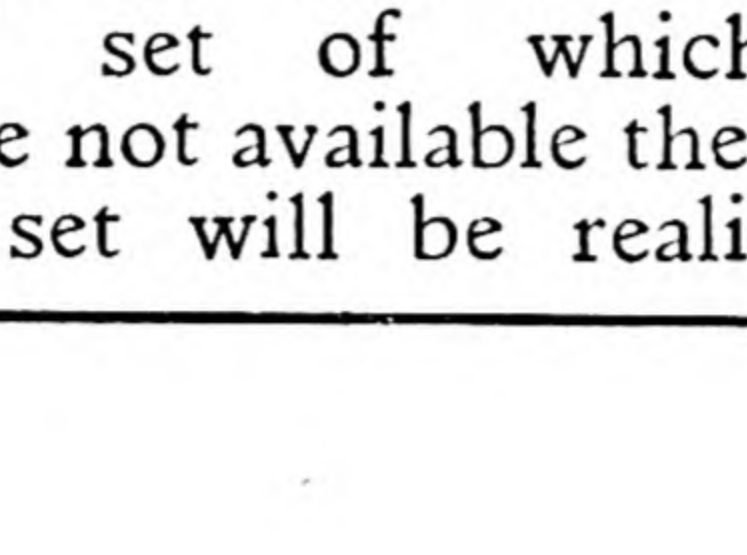
TO THE READER

KINDLY use this book very carefully. If the book is disfigured or marked or written on while in your possession the book will have to be replaced by a new copy or paid for. In case the book be a volume of set of which single volumes are not available the price of the whole set will be realized.



Checked

Checked 1978

Library

Class No. F

Book No. 558M

Acc. No. 8859

THE HIND BOOKSHOP
SRINAGAR

MAIGRET TO THE RESCUE

By the same Author

THE PATIENCE OF MAIGRET

MAIGRET TRAVELS SOUTH

MAIGRET ABROAD

Lom-05
AL-62 14.

Georges Simenon

MAIGRET TO THE RESCUE

F
558M

Translated from the French by
GEOFFREY SAINSBURY

LONDON
GEORGE ROUTLEDGE & SONS LTD.
BROADWAY HOUSE: 68-74 CARTER LANE, E.C. 4

First published in England, 1940

Printed in Great Britain by T. and A. CONSTABLE LTD
at the University Press, Edinburgh

CONTENTS

I. THE FLEMISH SHOP

CHAP.		PAGE
I.	ANNA PEETERS	1
II.	*L'ÉTOILE POLAIRE*	15
III.	THE PHOTOGRAPH	28
IV.	A PICNIC FROM THE PAST	42
V.	AT THE *CAFÉ DE LA MAIRIE*	52
VI.	THE HAMMER	68
VII.	A JACKET ON THE QUAY	81
VIII.	A VISIT TO THE URSULINES	94
IX.	ROUND THE WICKER CHAIR	107
X.	*THE SONG OF SOLVEIG*	120
XI.	THE LAST OF ANNA	132

II. THE *GUINGUETTE* BY THE SEINE

CHAP.		PAGE
I.	A Flat-Brimmed Top-Hat	139
II.	The Wedding-Feast	154
III.	Behind the *Guinguette*	169
IV.	The Meetings at the *Taverne Royale*	181
V.	The Doctor's Car	196
VI.	The Price for a Name	210
VII.	Old Ulrich	224
VIII.	In Mado's Flat	235
IX.	A Pound of Ham.	250
X.	Maigret Slips Away	265
XI.	The Settlement	279

THE FLEMISH SHOP

Translated from the French:

Chez les Flamands

H
556.21
W
144.5
823
S44M

Chapter I

ANNA PEETERS

WHEN Maigret got out of the train at Givet the first person he saw was Anna Peeters.

She was standing exactly opposite his carriage, as though she had foreseen that he would stop just there. Yet she seemed neither surprised nor proud of having calculated so nicely. She looked just the same as when he had seen her in Paris: probably she was never otherwise. Her coat and skirt were iron-grey, her shoes black, while her hat was the kind of thing of which it is absolutely impossible to remember either the colour or the shape.

Only one difference. Here, on the almost empty, wind-swept platform, she seemed a shade taller and broader. Her nose was red, and the handkerchief she was holding was rolled up in a ball.

"I felt sure you'd come, *Monsieur le commissaire.*"

She certainly looked sure, but whether she was sure of him or of herself was not so easy to tell. Without any smile of greeting, she asked in a business-like way:

"Have you any other luggage?"

No. Maigret only had his shabby old gladstone-bag, and, heavy as it was, he didn't want a porter.

The few third-class passengers who had left the train had already disappeared. The girl held out her platform ticket to the collector, who stared hard at her. That, however, did not appear to embarrass her, and as soon as they had passed through she went on:

"I thought at first of getting a room ready for you at home. But on second thoughts I decided it would be more suitable for you to be in a hotel. So I booked one of the best rooms in the *Hôtel de la Meuse*."

They dived into the narrow streets of Givet, where every passer-by turned round to look at them. Maigret walked heavily, his gladstone dragging at his shoulder. He was trying to take everything in, the people in the streets, the houses, and, most of all, his companion.

"What's that noise?" he asked, conscious of a vague murmur that he could not identify.

"The Meuse in flood, pounding against the piles of the bridge. Shipping's been held up for the last three weeks."

At the end of a narrow lane they suddenly found themselves facing the wide river. Here and there, the brown flood spread out over the fields. In other places a shed stood up out of the water.

At least a hundred barges were there, as well as tugs and dredgers, all made fast alongside one another to form one vast floating block.

"Here's your hotel. I'm afraid it's none too comfortable. Perhaps you'd like to stop for a bit and have a bath?"

It was bewildering. Maigret did not know what to think of her. Perhaps no woman had ever aroused his curiosity so much as Anna Peeters, who remained perfectly calm, without smiling, without making the slightest attempt to look pretty, and who now and again dabbed her red nose with her handkerchief.

She must have been between twenty-five and thirty. Much taller than the average, she was also a solidly built, large-boned woman to a degree that made anything like gracefulness impossible.

Her clothes were extremely sober and quite commonplace.

It was only her bearing that was really quite distinguished. She seemed perfectly at home, and treated Maigret as her guest. It was up to her to make all arrangements.

"I've no reason to want a bath."

"In that case, perhaps you'd come to the house straight away. Give your bag to the porter.—Here! Porter! . . . Take it up to No. 9. . . . Monsieur will be coming back presently."

And Maigret, watching her out of the corner of his eye, thought:

"I must look like a schoolboy!"

Yet that was just the absurdity of it: he looked anything but a schoolboy! If she was stoutly built, he was nevertheless half as big again, and his enormous overcoat made him look as though hewn from a block of granite.

"You're not too tired?"

"I'm not tired at all."

"In that case I can run through the principal points as we walk along."

As a matter of fact, she had already been through the principal points in Paris. One day, on entering his room at the *Police Judiciaire*, he had found this stranger, who had been patiently waiting for two or three hours. Nothing the clerk had said had succeeded in choking her off.

When anybody had tried to find out her business, they had only received the answer:

"It's personal."

As soon as the inspector had sat down at his desk, she had handed him a letter. Maigret had at once recognized the writing as that of a cousin of his wife's, living at Nancy.

My dear Maigret,

Mademoiselle Anna Peeters has been recommended to me by my brother-in-law, who knew her ten years ago, and who gives

her an excellent character. As for her troubles, she can tell you about them herself. Do what you can for her. . . .

"You live at Nancy?"

"No. Givet."

"But this letter . . ."

"I went on purpose to Nancy, before coming to Paris, for I knew that I could get an introduction to someone high up in the police."

She wasn't like the usual person who came to beg a favour. She didn't fidget, she didn't stumble over her words, she didn't plead. There was nothing pathetic about her, or even humble. Looking straight in front of her, she stated her business clearly, as though claiming no more than her due.

"Unless you take the matter up, we're lost, all of us, and it will be the most horrible mistake."

Maigret had listened attentively to a rather complicated family story.

The Peeters kept a shop by the Belgian frontier. A father and mother, and three children. Anna worked in the shop, Maria was a teacher, while Joseph was a law student at Nancy. . . .

This Joseph had had a child by a local girl. The child was now three years of age. . . . And all at once its mother had disappeared, and the Peeters were suspected of having either killed or kidnapped her. . . .

It had nothing whatever to do with Maigret. The local police were handling the case and had not appealed for help. In fact, when Maigret had wired for information, the answer was in no way ambiguous:

Peeters family guilty stop arrest imminent.

That had decided him. So here he was in Givet, though

without any official authority, being led by the hand, so to speak, by Anna Peeters, whom he never stopped observing.

* * * *

The river sped northward, swirling noisily round each pile of the bridge, and carrying whole trees in its onrush.

The wind, sweeping up the valley against the stream, lashed the water into real waves. It was no more than three o'clock, yet the day was already drawing in.

Gusts of wind blew down the streets. The few people in them hurried about their business, and Anna was not the only one whose nose was running.

"Look down this lane. . . . On the left . . ."

Anna paused as discreetly as she could, and with a slight movement of her hand indicated the second house, a poor, two-storeyed cottage. A window was already lit up by an oil-lamp in one of the rooms.

"That's where she lives."

"Who?"

"Germaine Piedbœuf, of course. The girl who . . ."

"Who had your brother's child?"

"If it's his. We've only her word for it. . . . Look!"

In the doorway of another house, a couple were standing in the shadow. The girl, who wore no hat, was doubtless a factory-hand. Only the man's back was visible.

"Is that her?"

"How could it be? I told you she'd disappeared. . . . But it's one of the same sort. You see what I mean? . . . And she persuaded my brother he was its father."

"Isn't the child like him?"

And Anna answered coldly:

"He's like his mother. Come on. We'd better be going.

These people are always spying at you from behind their curtains."

"Does she live with her family?"

"With her father, who's a night-watchman at the factory. And then there's her brother, Gérard."

The little house, and most of all the lamp-lit window, were henceforth engraved on the inspector's mind.

"You've never been to Givet before?"

"I've been through it once, but without stopping."

The quay seemed interminable. It was very wide, and every twenty yards was a bollard for the mooring-ropes of the barges. A few warehouses. A low building, over which a flag was flying.

"That's the French Customs House. . . . We live further on, near the Belgian."

The lighters tugged at their moorings and rubbed against each other. Some untethered horses were browsing on the few patches of thin grass.

"Do you see that light? . . . That's our house."

A customs officer watched them pass, without saying anything. A group of bargees watched them too, and then began talking in Flemish.

"What are they saying?"

She did not answer at once, and for the first time she turned her head away.

"That one would never know the truth."

And she quickened her pace, leaning forward into the wind.

They had left the town behind them. This was the domain of the river, the customs, barges, and bargees. Here and there an electric light, switched on prematurely, looked weak and thin in the fading afternoon light. Some washing, hung up in one of the barges, flapped noisily in the wind. A few children were playing in the mud.

"The detective came again yesterday. He said the examining magistrate had given orders we were to hold ourselves at the disposal of the police. That's the fourth time they've come and searched the house from top to bottom."

They were approaching the house, a fair-sized building, by the quay, where more barges than usual were made fast alongside. There was no other house near by. Nothing but the Belgian Customs House a hundred yards away, beside which stood a boundary-stone marking the frontier.

"Will you come in?"

On the windows of the door were transparent advertisements of some brand of metal polish. As it opened, a bell rang inside.

And the moment you crossed the threshold you were enveloped in warmth and an indescribable atmosphere, thick and quiet, laden with a mixture of smells. It wasn't easy to sort them out. A trace of cinnamon, and a graver undercurrent of ground coffee. Behind those was paraffin, and lastly a whiff of gin.

A single electric light in the middle of the shop. A counter painted dark brown, across which a white-haired woman in a black bodice was talking in Flemish to a bargee's wife who carried a baby.

"Will you come straight through, Inspector?"

Maigret had time to catch a glimpse of shelves piled high with goods. More especially, he noticed that one part of the counter was covered with zinc and that on it stood bottles of gin or eau-de-vie with tin pouring-spouts.

But he had no time to see more, as he was being shown through another glass-panelled door, fitted with a muslin curtain. They went through the kitchen, where an old man was sitting in a wicker arm-chair, drawn up close to the stove.

"This way."

It was colder in the passage beyond. Then another door, opening onto an unexpected room, half drawing-room, half dining-room, with a piano, a violin-case, a carefully polished parquet floor, comfortable furniture, reproductions of famous pictures on the walls.

"Let me take your overcoat."

The table was laid. A check table-cloth, silver, cups and saucers of fine china.

"You'll have some coffee, won't you?"

Maigret's coat was already hanging in the passage, and Anna returned to the room in a white silk blouse which made her even less girlish than before.

And yet she was a full-bodied woman. What was it, then, that divested her of all femininity? It was impossible to imagine her falling in love. Still more impossible to think of a man falling in love with her.

Obviously everything had been arranged beforehand. She brought in a steaming coffee-pot, and poured out three cupfuls. Disappearing again for a moment, she returned with a *tarte au riz*.

"Sit down, *Monsieur le commissaire*. . . . My mother will be coming in a moment."

"Is it you who plays the piano?"

"And my sister too. But she has less time than I have. In the evening she generally has some exercises to correct."

"And the violin?"

"That's my brother's."

"He's not in Givet, I suppose?"

"He'll be here presently. I told him you were coming."

She cut the tart and handed Maigret a slice with such authority that there was no question of his refusing. Madame Peeters entered the room, her hands clasped in front of her,

greeting the guest with a timid smile, a smile full of sadness and resignation.

"Anna told me you were coming. It's very kind of you. . . ."

She was more Flemish than her daughter, and she spoke with a decided accent. Her features, however, were of considerable refinement, and her strikingly white hair invested her with a certain distinction. She sat on the edge of her chair, like a woman who never sits for more than a few minutes at a time.

"You must be hungry after your journey. For my part, I've lost all appetite since . . ."

Maigret thought of the old man by the kitchen stove. Why didn't he come for a cup of coffee and a slice of tart? At the same moment Madame Peeters said to her daughter:

"Take a slice to your father."

And to the inspector:

"He hardly ever leaves his chair. In fact, he doesn't realize . . ."

The atmosphere was so far from being dramatic that it was hard to believe that anything could disturb it. The impression one had on entering was that even the most fearsome events outside could make little headway against the peace and quiet of this Flemish house, where there was not a particle of dust, not a breath of air, and no sound but the gentle snoring of the stove.

And Maigret, while starting on his thick slice of tart, began asking questions.

"When did it happen, exactly?"

"On January 3rd."

"And it's now the 20th."

"Yes. They didn't think of accusing us at the beginning."

"This girl—what do you call her? Germaine . . ."

"Germaine Piedbœuf," answered Anna, who was now back in the room. "She came about eight in the evening. My mother went into the shop to see what she wanted."

"What did she want?"

Madame Peeters brushed away a tear as she answered:

"The same as usual. . . . She complained that Joseph never came to see her or even sent her a word. . . . And to think of all the work he has to do! It's wonderful how he does it, with all this trouble hanging over our heads. . . ."

"Did she stay long?"

"About five minutes, I suppose. I had to tell her not to shout, as we didn't want all the bargees coming in to see what was the matter. Then Anna came into the shop and told her she'd better go."

"And she went?"

"Anna led her out, while I came back into the kitchen and went on clearing the table."

"You never saw her again?"

"Never."

"In fact, from that moment she wasn't seen again by anybody?"

"That's what they say."

"Had she said anything about suicide?"

"No. And girls of that sort don't kill themselves. . . . Won't you have some more coffee? . . . And another bit of tart? Anna made it. . . ."

The latter sat placidly on her chair. She watched the inspector as though the rôles were reversed, as though it was she who belonged to the Quai des Orfèvres and he to the Flemish shop.

"What were you all doing that evening? Can you remember?"

It was with a sad smile that Anna answered:

"We've had to remember! They've questioned us over and over again. Coming back from the shop, I went upstairs to fetch some knitting-wool. My sister was here playing the piano. When I came down, Marguerite had just arrived."

"Marguerite?"

"A cousin, the daughter of Dr. Van de Weert. They live in Givet. . . . And I may as well tell you at once—you're bound to know sooner or later—she's engaged to Joseph."

Madame Peeters got up with a sigh, as the shop bell had rung. Then she could be heard talking Flemish in the shop in an almost cheerful voice while weighing out some haricots or peas.

"It's been a terrible grief to my mother. Ever since they were tiny, it's been an understood thing that they were to be married. At sixteen they were definitely engaged. But of course there was no question of marriage till Joseph was through with the University. . . . Then this child came. . . ."

"And it made a difference, I suppose?"

"Yes. Only Marguerite was determined she'd never marry anyone else. She and Joseph have always loved each other."

"Did Germaine Piedbœuf know about her?"

"Yes. But she'd made up her mind to marry Joseph, and she got at him, until in the end, for peace' sake, he promised. In fact, the wedding was to be as soon as he passed his exams."

The shop bell rang again, and Madame Peeters trotted back to the sitting-room.

"You were telling me what you did on the evening of the 3rd."

"Yes, and as I said, I came downstairs and found Marguerite and my sister in this room. . . . We were playing the piano most of the time up to about half-past ten. My father went to bed as usual at nine. Then, when Marguerite went, my sister and I accompanied her as far as the bridge."

"Did you meet anybody?"

"Nobody. . . . It was very cold. . . . We came home, and the next day we went on just as usual without suspecting anything had happened. In the afternoon something was said about Germaine Piedbœuf's having disappeared. The day after, it looked serious; but it wasn't till the day after that that we realized we had come under suspicion because the girl had come to the shop. We had to go and make statements to the police, and they searched the whole premises. They even did some digging in the garden."

"Your brother wasn't in Givet on the 3rd?"

"No, he only comes at week-ends. Very rarely during the week. He rides over on his motor-bike. . . . Everybody's against us. The whole town. You see, we're foreigners . . . and we've more money than most."

A note of pride came into her voice. Or rather a note of self-assurance.

"You've no idea of all the dreadful things they've been saying. . . ."

The shop bell rang again, then a youthful voice called out:

"It's only me."

Hurried steps, and a moment later Marguerite burst into the sitting-room, halting abruptly at the sight of Maigret.

"Excuse me. . . . I didn't know . . ."

"It's Inspector Maigret. . . . You know. . . . He's come to help us."

Then, turning to Maigret:

"This is my cousin."

A tiny, gloved hand was enclosed in the inspector's heavy paw. A shy smile.

"Yes. Anna told me you were coming."

Marguerite was a very feminine type. Small and well-cut features surrounded by fair, curly hair.

"I hear you play the piano."

"Yes. I love music more than anything . . . particularly if I'm sad."

Her smile made one think of the pretty faces of advertisements, the lips slightly pouting, the eyes soft, the head a little inclined.

"Isn't Maria here yet?"

"No. Her train must be late."

Maigret was sitting on a thin-legged chair that creaked as he crossed his legs.

"At what time did you come here on the evening of the 3rd?"

"About half-past eight. We always have dinner early, and that night my father had some friends coming in afterwards to play bridge."

"What was the weather like?"

"It was raining and very cold. It rained all that week."

"Was the river already in flood?"

"It was rising rapidly. But the weirs hadn't been carried away then, and the boats were still going up and down."

"A little more tart, Inspector? . . . Are you sure you won't? . . . A cigar, then?"

Anna held out a box of Belgian cigars, explaining:

"They're not smuggled. You see, half the house is in Belgium and the other half in France."

"One thing: they can't drag your brother in, can they? He was at Nancy, I suppose?"

Anna frowned.

"I'm afraid it's not so simple as that. Only the other day a drunken sot came forward and told the police he'd seen Joseph's motor-bike pass along the quay. As if he could remember a thing like that all of a sudden a fortnight later! . . . It's another bit of Gérard's wangling—he's Germaine

Piedbœuf's brother. That's about all he has to do—running round trying to trump up evidence against us. The Piedbœufs are out to make a good thing out of this. In fact, we've heard they want to claim three hundred thousand francs damages."

"Where's the child?"

They could hear Madame Peeters hurrying from the kitchen into the shop, where the bell had rung once more. Anna put the tart away in the sideboard and stood the coffee-pot on the stove.

"At home with them."

A raucous voice came from the shop. A bargee ordering a glass of gin.

Chapter II

L'ÉTOILE POLAIRE

WITH nervous fingers Marguerite Van de Weert was rummaging in her handbag. She was obviously in a hurry to show something.

"You haven't seen the *Echo de Givet*, have you?"

She handed a newspaper-cutting to Anna while a modest smile played about her lips.

"Who gave you the idea?" asked Anna.

"Nobody. I suddenly thought of it."

Anna passed the cutting on to Maigret. It was only an advertisement.

A substantial reward will be paid if the motor-cyclist who passed along the Meuse road on the evening of the 3rd will present himself at the Epicerie Peeters, *Givet.*

"I didn't dare give my address, but I thought . . ."

It seemed to Maigret that Anna looked at her cousin a trifle impatiently, while she murmured:

"Certainly. . . . It's an idea. . . . But nobody'll come."

Poor Marguerite, who had so much looked forward to the applause which would greet her manœuvre!

"Why shouldn't anybody come? If somebody went by on a motor-bike, why shouldn't he come forward? We know it wasn't Joseph. . . ."

The sitting-room door was open, and they could hear the kettle singing in the kitchen, where Madame Peeters was busying herself with the dinner. And voices too, coming

from the entrance of the shop. The two girls at once pricked their ears.

"Come in, will you? I don't suppose we've anything to tell you, but . . ."

"Joseph!" stammered Marguerite, rising from her chair.

It was not so much love as fervour that animated her voice and transfigured her. In obvious suspense, she remained standing, waiting for her fiancé to appear. And everything about her promised the appearance of some superman.

His voice reached them again, coming this time from the kitchen:

"Good evening, Mother. . . ."

And a stranger's voice:

"I hope you'll excuse me, madame, but I've a few small points to check, and seeing your son pass . . ."

The two newcomers were now in the sitting-room doorway. At the sight of Marguerite, Joseph frowned ever so slightly.

"How are you, Marguerite?" he said, with a forced gentleness that was a little embarrassing.

She took his hand in both of hers.

"You're not too tired, Joseph? . . . You mustn't let this get you down."

Anna, more self-possessed, had turned to the other person.

"This is Inspector Maigret here. Perhaps you already know him . . .?"

"Machère," answered the man, introducing himself. "Is it true that you . . .?"

They were all somehow uncomfortable, cluttered up as they were between the door and the table.

"I'm here quite unofficially," grunted Maigret. "Please go on exactly as you would if I wasn't here."

He felt a touch on his arm.

"My brother, Joseph. . . . Inspector Maigret."

Joseph held out a long, cold, bony hand. He was half a head taller than Maigret, though the latter was tall enough at five foot eleven. But he was so slightly built that, in spite of his twenty-five years, he gave the impression of a growing boy.

A pinched nose. Tired eyes with dark rings under them. Fair hair cut very short. He must have had weak eyes too, for he was constantly blinking, as though to ward off the light.

"*Enchanté, Monsieur le commissaire.* . . ."

There wasn't even any style about him. When he took off his greasy mackintosh it was to disclose a poorly cut, nondescript grey suit.

"I caught sight of him by the bridge," said the detective, Machère. "So I asked him to give me a lift on his carrier."

Then he turned to Anna, addressing her as if she was the real mistress of the house. Madame Peeters was in the kitchen with her husband, who had not stirred from his wicker chair by the stove.

"I suppose there's a way up onto the roof?"

Glances were exchanged.

"By the little window in the loft," answered Anna. "Do you want to go up?"

"Yes. I'd just like to have a look."

It gave Maigret an opportunity to look over the house. The stairs were covered with linoleum, so polished that you had to be careful not to slip.

Three doors gave on to the first-floor landing. Marguerite and Joseph had remained downstairs. Anna led the way, and Maigret noticed a slight roll of her hips as she walked.

"I'd like to have a word with you," whispered Machère.

"Presently."

They reached the second floor. One side had been con-

verted into an attic room. The other, left as it was, with the rafters showing, was used as a storeroom. To reach the little window, Machère had to climb on to a couple of packing-cases.

"Have you got a light?" asked Maigret.

"An electric torch. . . ."

He was young, with a round jovial face. Obviously a man of tireless energy. Maigret did not follow him out on to the roof, but watched through the little window. The wind blew in squalls. He could hear the dull roar of the river and see on its ruffled surface the broken reflection of the lights on the other bank.

To the left, on the cornice, stood a 400-gallon tank of galvanized iron, whose purpose was to collect rain-water. The detective made straight for it.

He looked into it, but was apparently disappointed, for he turned away at once. He then walked for a moment or two on the roof, suddenly stooping down to pick something up.

Maigret withdrew his head, to find Anna waiting patiently behind him. A second later Machère's legs appeared, then his body and head.

"I hadn't thought of it till this afternoon, though I knew people drank rain-water here. . . . But the body's not there."

"What was it you picked up?"

"A handkerchief. A lady's handkerchief."

He spread it out and turned his torch on it, but looked in vain for a monogram. The handkerchief was filthy, having no doubt been there, exposed to the weather, for some time.

"We must look into this," said Machère as he turned to go.

* * * *

Returning to the warmth of the sitting-room, they found

Joseph sitting on the piano-stool, reading the advertisement which Marguerite had just shown him. She stood before him in her smart and very feminine clothes.

"Would you like to come along with me?" Maigret asked the young detective.

"Where are you staying?"

"The *Hôtel de la Meuse*," answered Anna. "But are you going already, Inspector? . . . I was hoping you'd stay to dinner. But of course . . . I don't want to press you. . . ."

Maigret crossed the kitchen, Madame Peeters looking at him aghast.

"Are you going?"

As for the old man, his eyes were devoid of any sparkle of intelligence. He smoked away at his meerschaum pipe, his thoughts, if he had any, on it alone. Not the faintest notice did he take of Maigret.

They were outside now in the wind, with the roar of the river and the bumping of the boats. Machère found himself on Maigret's right, but he quickly shifted to the other side in deference to his superior.

"Do you think they're innocent?"

"I've no idea. Have you got any tobacco?"

"I'm afraid not. . . . You know, they've been talking about you a lot at Nancy. And that's what bothers me. Because these Peeters . . ."

But Maigret had stopped and was gazing at the boats in the stream. Thanks to the stoppage of traffic on the river, Givet had quite the look of a big port. There were several Rhine lighters of a thousand tons—great black things of steel. Beside them the wooden barges from the north looked like varnished toys.

"I shall have to buy a cap," grumbled Maigret, whose hand was glued to the brim of his bowler.

SARDAR SINGH COLLE
Acc. No. 8859

"What did they tell you?" asked Machère. "That they were innocent, of course!"

He had to shout to make himself heard above the wind. Givet, five hundred yards away, was just a cluster of lights. Behind them the Flemish house rose into the boisterous sky, its windows yellowed by gentle light.

"Where do they come from?"

"From the north of Belgium. The old man was born somewhere up beyond Limbourg by the Dutch frontier. . . . He's twenty years older than his wife, and has turned eighty. He was a basket-maker with four men under him, working in the workshop behind the house. It's not many years since he gave it up. But he's completely senile now."

"They're moneyed people?"

"They're supposed to be. The house is theirs and they've been known to advance money to bargees with no capital, to enable them to buy a barge of their own. . . . They're not quite the same as us. A different outlook. By all accounts they're worth hundreds of thousands of francs, but that doesn't stop the old lady serving tots of gin over the counter. Only, of course, the son's to be a lawyer. The daughters play the piano, and one's a *régente* in a big convent in Namur. . . . That's more than an ordinary teacher. Something like being mistress in a *lycée*."

Machère pointed to the barges.

"Half the men in them are Flemish. And they don't like changing their habits, particularly in the matter of drink. The French bargees go to the bars down by the bridge, but the Belgians won't go without their native gin if they can help it. And they like to be served by people who talk their own language. Besides, being astride of the frontier, the Peeters can sell French and Belgian goods alike. That's a great advantage. Often enough a boat will take

in stocks for a week or more. That's good business, I can tell you."

The wind pressed their overcoats against their legs. It was so rough that spray was being flicked on to the decks of the laden barges.

"They've got queer ideas. It makes a difference to them that the place isn't exactly a bar. You can have a drink there, but it remains a grocer's all the same; and the women have a tot too as they do their shopping. . . . It's the drink that pays best, yet the Peeters would never admit they kept a bar."

"The Piedbœufs?"

"A different stamp altogether. . . . A night-watchman in the factory. The daughter was a typist in the same business. The boy works there too."

"Is he a steady chap?"

"It's difficult to say, but I doubt it. He doesn't seem to put in a great deal of work, judging by the time he spends playing billiards at the *Café de la Mairie*. . . . He's a good-looking fellow, and knows it."

"And his sister?"

"Germaine? . . . She's knocked about with plenty of young fellows. You know: the sort you find kissing in any dark corner. . . . Still there's no doubt about one thing: the child is Joseph Peeters' all right. I've seen it, and nobody could say it wasn't like him. . . . And then, of course—one always comes back to the same point—Germaine went to the shop on the evening of the 3rd, and not a soul has seen her since."

Machère was not afraid of speaking his mind.

"I've searched high and low. I even got an architect to help me, and we made plans of the house to scale. There was only that one thing that I forgot—the roof. . . . In the ordinary way, one would hardly think of a body being hidden on a

roof. That's why I came back this afternoon. . . . I found the handkerchief, but nothing else."

"What about the Meuse?"

"Exactly! I was coming to that. I expect you know that when people are drowned the bodies are nearly always recovered at the weirs. There are ten of them between Givet and Namur. But these floods came, and the whole lot of them were carried away. That was two or three days after the crime. . . . It's about time they did something about it, for it happens almost every winter. But there it is! And if Germaine Piedbœuf's body was chucked into the river, there's no reason why it shouldn't be in Holland by now, or right out in the open sea."

"I was told that Joseph wasn't here that evening."

"I know. That's what he says. But there's a witness who claims to have recognized his motor-bike here at Givet."

"Has the boy any alibi?"

"He gives quite a plausible account of himself, but there's nothing to corroborate it. He lives in lodgings where he can easily get in and out without anybody seeing him. He says he spent most of the evening in one of the bars frequented by students. I went over to Nancy and questioned a number of them. Several can remember his spending an evening with them, but not one of them can be sure whether it was the 3rd, the 4th, or the 5th."

"Any chance of its being suicide?"

"Precious little. She wasn't the type. A common little thing, with not much health and no morals. . . . But she doted on the child."

"Is there nobody else in the picture?"

Machère did not answer immediately. His eye wandered to the barges, which formed a little island, separated from the land by a few yards of water.

"I've tried myself to think of anybody else who might have done it," he went on at last. "I've checked up on all the bargees. . . . Most of them are a very steady lot, who live on board with their wives and children.

"There was only one boat I didn't like the look of. Absolutely filthy, and in such rotten condition that it's a wonder she keeps afloat. The *Etoile Polaire*, the last boat upstream."

"Whose is it?"

"A Belgian's. Comes from Tilleur near Liége. He's a nasty old brute who's been had up before for assaulting girls. He won't spend a sou on upkeep, and there isn't a company that will insure his boat. . . . Apart from the time he was had up, there have been any amount of stories of the way he carries on with women and little girls. . . . But there's nothing whatever to connect him with Germaine Piedbœuf."

The two men walked on towards the bridge. They came to street lamps, then bars on the right, French bars with automatic pianos.

"I'm keeping an eye on him all the same. . . . But this evidence about the motor-bike . . ."

"Where are you staying?"

"At the *Hôtel de la Gare*."

Maigret held out his hand.

"I'll be seeing you again, old man. . . . In the meantime, don't forget, you're in charge of the case. I'm only here as an amateur."

"But what do you expect me to do about it? . . . If we don't find the body, we'll never be able to prove anything. And if it's been thrown in the water, we never will find it. . . ."

Maigret shook hands with him absent-mindedly and walked off to the *Hôtel de la Meuse*.

* * * *

During dinner Maigret had written in his little notebook:

Opinions on the Peeters.

Machère: It's the drink that pays best, but they'd never admit they kept a bar.

Landlord of Hôtel de la Meuse: *They take themselves very seriously. It never occurred to me to make* my *son into a lawyer.*

A bargee: In Belgium they're all like that.

Another: They stand up for each other like a band of Free Masons.

At the bridge you were right in the heart of a small French town. Little streets. Cafés full of people playing billiards and dominoes. The smell of aniseed, rising from the *apéritifs.*

Then that short stretch of river, the customs houses, and finally the Flemish shop that was at once the last house in France and the first in Belgium. A Flemish shop whose shelves were bent under the weight of food-stuffs; a bit of counter covered with zinc for the gin-drinkers; a kitchen behind, where a man turned eighty sat aimlessly in his wicker chair by the stove; a general living-room with a piano, a violin, comfortable chairs, a home-made tart, the large checks of the table-cloth. Then Anna and Marguerite, and Joseph, tall and weedy, arriving on his motor-bike to be admired by his womenfolk.

The *Hôtel de la Meuse* was a commercial hotel. The landlord knew all the travellers, each of whom had his own napkin.

About nine o'clock Joseph Peeters slunk in timidly, went up to the inspector, and stammered:

"Have you . . . have you heard the news?"

Everyone turned to stare at them, so Maigret thought it better to take the young man up to his room.

"What is it?"

"You knew about the advertisement, didn't you? . . . Well, a chap's come forward, a garage-hand from Dinant, who says he passed along the road by the Meuse about half-past eight on his motor-bike. He remembers passing our house."

Maigret hadn't started unpacking. He sat on the bed, leaving the only arm-chair to his visitor.

"Do you really love Marguerite?"

"Yes . . . that is . . ."

"That is what?"

"She's a cousin of ours. We were engaged to be married. It was decided ages ago."

"But it didn't stop you having an affair with Germaine Piedbœuf."

A silence. Then a faintly muttered:

"No."

"Did you love her?"

"I don't know."

"Would you have married her?"

"I don't know."

The light shone full on Joseph's thin face, with its tired eyes and sagging features. He didn't dare look Maigret in the face.

"How did it happen?"

"I came across her. Started knocking about with her . . ."

"And Marguerite?"

"That's different altogether."

"And then?"

"Then she said she was going to have a baby. I didn't know what to do. . . ."

"It was your mother who . . .?"

"Yes, and my sisters. They persuaded me that Germaine had already had other . . ."

"Other adventures? . . ."

The window looked out on to the river just where it was broken by the piles of the bridge. The din was incessant.

"Do you love Marguerite?"

The young man stood up, anxious, ill at ease.

"What do you mean?"

"Are you in love with Marguerite or Germaine?"

"I . . . As a matter of fact . . ."

There were beads of sweat on his forehead.

"How should I know? . . . My mother had already made plans to set me up as a lawyer in Rheims."

"Plans for you and Marguerite. Is that it?"

"I suppose so. . . . I met the other at a dance."

"Germaine?"

"At a dance I was forbidden to go to. . . . I saw her home. . . . And on the way . . ."

"And Marguerite?"

"That's different altogether. . . . I . . ."

"You didn't leave Nancy on the night of the 3rd?"

Maigret had had enough. He moved towards the door. He had sized Joseph up: raw-boned but spineless. His self-respect was only just maintained by the admiration of his sisters and cousin.

"What are you doing with yourself these days?"

"Working for my exam. It's the last. . . . Anna sent me a telegram asking me to run over and see you. . . . Do you . . .?"

"No, I don't need you here. You can go back to Nancy."

A figure that Maigret was not to forget for many a long day. Blinking eyes that had become red-rimmed with worry. The jacket cut too straight. The trousers baggy at the knees.

In the same suit, with a mackintosh slipped over it, he

would soon be riding off to Nancy, without exceeding the speed limits in the villages.

And at Nancy he would find a typical little student's bedroom with an obliging old landlady to look after him. . . . Lectures that he never cut. . . . At noon the café. . . . Billiards in the evening. . . .

"If I want you, I'll let you know."

And Maigret, left alone, put his elbows on the window-sill and gazed once more at the Meuse rushing down towards the lowlands. In the distance a quiet little light: the Flemish shop.

On the dark surface of the water, still darker masses. Boats, masts, funnels, the blunt bows of the barges.

Nearest of all, the *Etoile Polaire*.

He went out, filling his pipe, with his coat collar turned up. And the wind was so strong that, in spite of his weight, he had to lean forward to keep his balance.

Chapter III

THE PHOTOGRAPH

As usual, Maigret was up and about at eight o'clock. With his hands in his overcoat pockets and his pipe between his teeth, he stood motionless, his eye resting sometimes on the racing river, sometimes on the passers-by.

The wind was just as strong as on the previous day. It was much colder than in Paris.

He was standing on French soil, yet it was impossible to forget the nearness of the frontier. The houses were definitely Belgian houses, of ugly brown brick, with doorsteps of hewn stone, and copper flower-pots on the window-sills.

The people, too, had in their lined faces something of the hardness of the Walloon type. And then there was the khaki uniform of the Belgian customs officers.

Givet was unmistakably a frontier town, the meeting-ground of two nations. Even in the shops you could not forget it, as both French and Belgian money were accepted.

Maigret was more than ever conscious of it when he went into one of the *bistros* on the quay for a glass of hot grog. A typical French *bistro*, with the whole range of *apéritifs* of all colours. Light-coloured walls, covered with mirrors.

Some ten or a dozen bargees were standing at the bar, having their morning glass of white wine, talking to the owners of a couple of tugs. They were discussing the possibility of proceeding downstream in spite of the floods.

"It's doubtful whether you'd get under the bridge at

Dinant. And even if you could, we're asking fifteen francs a ton per kilometre."

"It's too much. . . . At that price it's best to hang on."

Eyes were turned on Maigret. One of them, spotting who he was, nudged his neighbour.

"One of the Belgians is talking of going down without a tug at all. Just drifting down on the stream. . . ."

There wasn't a single Belgian in the café. They preferred the Peeters' shop with its dark woodwork and its mingled smells of coffee, chicory, cinnamon, and gin. There, in their own atmosphere, they could stand for hours at a time, leaning on the counter, talking lazily, while their pale blue eyes would stare dreamily at the transparent advertisements stuck on the glass door.

Maigret listened to all that was said around him. From the conversation, he gathered that the Belgians were unpopular, not so much because they differed in character, as because they were competitors. Their boats were kept in a perfect state of repair and were fitted with powerful motors, and they were generally in a position to undercut the French, often accepting cargoes at rates which the latter thought ridiculous.

"And they go about killing girls into the bargain!"

The remark was made for Maigret's benefit, and the speaker watched the inspector out of the corner of his eye.

"Why don't they arrest the whole family? I can't think what the police are waiting for. . . . Unless it's because they're well-to-do folk. . . ."

Maigret left the bar and wandered once more along the quay, watching the brown flood which swept branches of trees down towards the sea. In a little side-street on the left he suddenly caught sight of the house which Anna had pointed out to him.

The morning light was grim, the sky a uniform grey. The people in the streets were cold, and hurried about their business.

Maigret went up to the front door and gave a pull at the bell. It was a little after a quarter past eight. The woman who opened the door had apparently been washing or scrubbing, for she wiped her hands on her wet apron as she asked:

"Who do you want?"

At the end of the passage he could see the kitchen, and in the middle of the floor a pail and a scrubbing-brush.

"Is Monsieur Piedbœuf in?"

The woman looked him up and down mistrustfully.

"Which Monsieur Piedbœuf?"

"The father."

"You're from the police, I suppose. In that case, you ought to know that he's always in bed at this time of the morning. He's on duty all night and only comes off at seven. . . . Still, if you'd like to go up . . ."

"I won't disturb him, thank you. What about his son?"

"He went out to work ten minutes ago."

Maigret heard a spoon drop on to the kitchen floor, and looking over the woman's shoulder he could see a bit of a child's head.

"Is that, by any chance . . .?" he began.

"Yes, that's poor Mademoiselle Germaine's boy. . . . Well, are you coming in or not? If you stand in the doorway much longer you'll make the whole house cold."

Maigret went in. The passage walls were painted imitation marble. The kitchen was in a fearful mess, and the woman muttered under her breath as she removed the pail. But it was impossible to tell whether she was grumbling or apologizing.

On the table were dirty cups and plates. A child of two was sitting all alone, clumsily eating a boiled egg and smearing his chin with the yolk.

The woman was at least forty. She was thin, and her face ascetic.

"Are you looking after the child?"

"As much as I can. . . . His grandfather's in bed half the day, and there's nobody else at home, now that they've killed his mother. When I'm called out, I take him round to one of the neighbours."

"When you're called out?"

"Yes. I'm a certified midwife."

She had discarded her check apron, as though it deprived her of her professional dignity.

"That's all right, my little Jojo, there's nothing to be frightened about."

The child had stopped eating and was staring at the inspector.

Was he really like Joseph Peeters? It was difficult to say. One thing was certain: he was not a robust child. The features were irregular, the head too big, the neck thin, and, most striking of all, the mouth was long and thin and looked like a ten-year-old's, to say the least of it.

He stared on at the inspector, but the eyes expressed nothing. Nor did any expression come into them when the midwife thought fit to kiss him rather theatrically and say:

"*Mon pauvre chou!* Eat up your egg, *mon chéri!*"

She hadn't asked Maigret to sit down. There was a large pool of water on the floor, and some soup simmering on the stove.

"I suppose you're the person they've brought from Paris?"

The voice was not exactly aggressive, but it was far from being friendly.

"What do you mean?"

"There's no use pretending. Everybody knows about it."

"About what?"

"You know as well as I do. That's a nice job you've put your hand to. . . . But I suppose the police will always be on the same side as there's money!"

Maigret frowned, not because the words had got under his skin, but because of the state of mind they revealed.

"They said as much themselves, those Belgians. They said things might go against them for the moment, but that everything would be changed as soon as some grand inspector came from Paris."

She was aggressive enough now, and her smile was decidedly unpleasant.

"You've only to look, to see how it's done. The case drags on, and the people who ought to be under lock and key are given plenty of time to work out a story amongst themselves. . . . And of course they know very well that Germaine's body will never be found.—Eat up your breakfast, my treasure. There's nothing to be frightened of."

Her eyes moistened as she looked at the child, whose spoon remained in mid-air as he gazed at the intruder.

"There's nothing you'd like to tell me?" asked Maigret.

"Nothing at all. The Peeters will have told you all about everything, and even proved that the child has nothing to do with that Joseph of theirs."

Maigret had been set down as an enemy, and there was nothing to be done about it. The atmosphere of the house was made up of poverty and hatred.

"And if you want to see Monsieur Piedbœuf, you've only to come back about twelve. That's when he gets up. And you'd find Monsieur Gérard here too, as he comes home for lunch."

She led him along the passage and closed the door behind him. Upstairs the blinds were down.

* * * *

Maigret found Machère near the Flemish shop talking to a couple of bargees, whom he left as soon as he caught sight of the inspector.

"What do they say?"

"I was asking them about the *Etoile Polaire*. . . . They think the skipper was at the *Café des Mariniers* on the evening of the 3rd, and that he left about eight, drunk, the same as any other evening. . . . He must be still asleep now, as I was on board a moment ago and he didn't seem to hear me."

Through the shop window they could see Madame Peeters' white hair. She was watching the two policemen as they stood there looking round them and pursuing a desultory conversation.

On one side of them the river that had burst its dams and was coursing along at a good four and a half knots.

On the other side the Flemish shop.

"There are two entrances," said Machère. "The one you can see from where you are, and another at the back. . . . There's a well in the yard. . . ."

And he hastily added:

"I took soundings, and there was no sign of the body there. . . . All the same—though I really can't tell you why—I've got the feeling it wasn't thrown into the Meuse. . . . I'd like to know what that handkerchief was doing on the roof. . . ."

"Did you hear about the motor-cyclist?"

"Yes. But if he did come along this way, it doesn't prove that Joseph didn't."

Exactly! And it was like that all along the line. No

proof one way or the other. In fact, no serious evidence at all.

Germaine Piedbœuf came into the shop about eight o'clock. According to the Belgians, she left a few minutes later, but nobody else saw her leave.

She had never been seen again.

And that was pretty well the whole story.

Yet on the strength of it the Piedbœufs were going to claim three hundred thousand francs damages.

Two bargees' wives entered the shop, ringing the bell as they did so.

"Do you still think, Inspector . . . ?"

"I don't think anything at all, old man. I'll be seeing you presently. . . ."

He too went into the shop, the two customers standing aside to make room for him. Madame Peeters called out:

"Anna!"

She bustled over to the kitchen door and opened it.

"Go straight through, *Monsieur le commissaire*. You know your way. . . . Anna'll be down in a moment. She's upstairs doing the rooms. . . ."

She then turned towards her customers, while the inspector went through the kitchen into the passage and slowly climbed the stairs.

Anna had evidently not heard. Sounds were coming from one of the rooms, and looking in through an open door, Maigret saw her, her hair tied up in a kerchief, brushing a pair of trousers.

She caught sight of the visitor in a looking-glass, and turned suddenly, dropping the brush.

"Is that you?"

Though dressed for housework, she looked just the same —well brought up, a little prim and reserved.

"Excuse me! Your mother told me you were up here. . . . Is this your brother's room?"

"Yes. He went off early this morning. He's gone back to his work. There's a stiff exam before him, and he's determined to pass with distinction, as he has in all the others."

On a chest of drawers was a large framed photograph of Marguerite Van de Weert.

And on it the girl had written in a long pointed hand the opening lines of the *Song of Solveig*:

L'hiver peut s'enfuir
Le printemps bien-aimé
Peut s'écouler.

Maigret had picked up the photograph to read the words. Anna looked hard at him—a defensive look, as though she expected him to smile.

"It's by Ibsen," she said.

"I know."

And Maigret even finished the verse:

"*Moi je t'attends ici,*
Ô mon beau fiancé,
Jusqu'à mon jour dernier."

He almost smiled, all the same, as his eye fell on the trousers which Anna was still holding. Such high-sounding words in such a homely setting!

And to think of Joseph Peeters, thin and weedy, badly dressed, with fair hair that no amount of brilliantine could keep in place. Joseph Peeters with his weak, blinking eyes and a nose that was out of proportion to the rest. Joseph Peeters. . . .

Ô mon beau fiancé . . .

And this portrait of a fluffy, pretty-pretty, provincial girl.

What had this quotation to do with Ibsen's tremendous drama? Was it a profession of faith, a flag nailed to a mast? Nothing of the kind! Just a few lines of poetry dutifully copied out by a proper young lady because it was the right thing to do.

Moi je t'attends ici. . . .

That was true, at any rate. She certainly had waited, waited for years. And in spite of Germaine Piedbœuf. In spite of the child.

Maigret felt slightly uncomfortable. He stared at the table covered with green blotting-paper, at the brass inkstand, which must have been a present, and at the penholders made of bakelite.

Absent-mindedly he opened a drawer.

A collection of amateur snapshots lay in a lidless cardboard box.

"My brother has a camera."

Maigret turned them over. . . . A group of lads in student caps. . . . Joseph on his motor-bike, leaning forward, his hand on the throttle, looking as though he'd be off in a moment at sixty miles an hour. . . . Anna at the piano. . . . Another girl, more slenderly built with a slight melancholy expression. . . .

"That's my sister, Maria."

And suddenly one that might have been a passport photograph, horrible as all such photos are with their harshly contrasting lights and shades.

A girl who had obviously reached womanhood, yet was so small and frail that the word woman seemed quite inapplicable. Great eyes which devoured half her face. She was wearing an absurd hat and looked as if she was scared by the camera.

"That's Germaine, isn't it?"

Her son was like her.

"Was she ill?"

"She wasn't strong. In fact, I think she'd had a touch of consumption at one time."

Just the opposite of Anna, who was strong as a horse. She was tall and well-knit. Yet what characterized her more than that was a sort of stability, both physical and moral, that was positively staggering. She had at last put the trousers down on the bed, which was covered with a white counterpane.

"I've been to her house."

"What did they say? . . . I expect they . . ."

"I only saw the midwife . . . and the child."

Anna asked no further question, as though held back by a sudden delicacy.

"Is your room next to this?"

"Yes. My sister and I share it."

There was a door from one room to the other, and the inspector went through. The sister's room was lighter, as it looked onto the quay. The bed was made; everything was as tidy as could be; not a single article of clothing left lying about—unless you counted the two nightgowns neatly folded on the pillows.

"You're twenty-five, aren't you?"

"Twenty-six."

Maigret wanted to ask her a question, but he didn't know quite how to put it.

"You've never been engaged?" he asked finally.

"Never."

But that wasn't really what he'd wanted to ask her. He was still more intrigued by her now that he'd seen her room. She impressed him like an enigmatic statue. And what he

wanted to know was whether this well-made but somewhat forbidding body had ever quickened and quivered, whether this practical girl had ever been anything but a model daughter, a devoted sister, a capable housewife, a Peeters. . . . In other words, whether beneath all that there was a woman.

She didn't shrink. She didn't look away. She must have known his eyes were taking stock of her figure as much as of her face, yet she didn't turn a hair.

"We see very few people. Hardly anybody except our cousins the Van de Weerts. . . ."

Maigret hesitated, and when he did speak his voice wasn't quite natural.

"I want you to help me with a little experiment. . . . Will you go down to the sitting-room and play the piano until I call? And if possible, I'd like you to play what was played on the evening of the 3rd. Who was playing then?"

"Maria was when Germaine came. But Marguerite came in a little later and she took her place. She sings, and plays her own accompaniments. . . . She's had singing lessons."

"What was it she was singing?"

"The thing you saw just now. The *Song of Solveig*. . . . But . . . I . . . I don't understand."

"It's just a little experiment."

She backed out of the room and was going to shut the door.

"No. Leave it open, please."

A minute or two later her fingers were running easily over the keys. Rippling chords floated up the stairs. And Maigret, without losing a moment, began opening the cupboards in the girls' room.

The first contained underclothes. Neat piles of chemises, knickers, and beautifully ironed petticoats.

She had started on the piece now. He recognized the tune.

And Maigret's thick fingers felt their way into the piles of white linen.

An onlooker would have taken him for a lover. Or someone racked by a strange hidden passion.

Thick, heavy linen, the kind that wears for ever. No frills, no nonsense.

The next thing was a drawer containing garters, hairpins and such-like. . . . There was no sign anywhere of powder or perfumes, except for a bottle of Russian eau-de-Cologne which was no doubt reserved for grand occasions.

The music swelled until the house seemed full of it. And little by little a voice became audible, growing in volume till finally it dominated the accompaniment :

"*Moi je t'attends ici,*
Ô mon beau fiancé . . ."

It wasn't Marguerite's voice that sang those words. It was Anna's. The syllables were distinct. Certain passages were lingered over.

And Maigret's fingers felt and felt.

In another pile of underclothes there was a rustle which was not of linen, but paper.

Another photograph. An amateur snapshot in sepia. A young curly-haired man with well-cut features. The upper lip protruded slightly in a self-confident smile with a touch of a sneer about it.

It reminded Maigret of somebody, but who it was, he couldn't tell.

"*Jusqu'à mon jour dernier.*"

Anna's was a grave voice, almost masculine. Slowly it faded away. Then :

"Do you want me to go on, *Monsieur le commissaire* ?"

He quickly shut the doors of the cupboard, slipped the

photograph into his pocket, and noiselessly darted back into Joseph's room, before answering:

"No. That'll do, thank you."

He noticed that Anna was paler when she came upstairs. Had she perhaps put a little too much feeling into the song? She looked round the room, but could find nothing unusual.

"I don't understand. . . . But never mind. . . . I wanted to ask you something, Inspector. You saw Joseph last night. What do you think of him?"

She had removed the kerchief from her head, and Maigret even fancied she had washed her hands.

"We must," she went on, "we absolutely must establish his innocence. It must be recognized by everybody. . . . We've got to make him happy. . . ."

"With Marguerite Van de Weert?"

Anna merely sighed.

"How old is your sister Maria?"

"Twenty-eight. . . . Nobody doubts that she'll one day be headmistress of her school at Namur."

Maigret felt the photograph in his pocket.

"Has she ever had any love-affairs?"

The answer was spontaneous:

"Maria?"

The tone made the meaning clear.

"Maria have a love-affair? . . . Little do you know her!"

"I'll be getting on with my work," said Maigret, going out on to the landing.

"Have you found out anything yet?"

"I don't know."

She followed him downstairs. In the kitchen he saw the old man, who had just taken his place in the wicker chair, and who appeared not even to see them as they passed.

"He doesn't notice anything nowadays," sighed Anna.

There were three or four people in the shop. Madame Peeters was filling glasses with gin. She bowed slightly to Maigret, without relinquishing the bottle or interrupting the conversation she was holding in Flemish.

She was probably telling them that this was the great inspector who'd come all the way from Paris, for everyone turned towards him and their looks were full of respect.

Outside, Machère was examining a bit of ground where the soil seemed looser than elsewhere.

"Found anything?" asked the inspector.

"I'm afraid not. I'm still looking for the body. For unless we find it, we shall never get these people."

He looked at the Meuse in a way which seemed to indicate that at any rate the body had not gone that way.

Chapter IV

A PICNIC FROM THE PAST

It was a little after twelve. For the fourth time that morning, Maigret was walking along the river-bank. On the other shore was a long stretch of whitewashed wall, belonging to the factory. Through the gateway dozens of workers, men and women, were pouring out and wending their way homeward, on foot or cycling, to their midday meal.

Maigret was about a hundred yards from the bridge when the stream of factory-hands began to pass him. One face caught his attention instantly. He turned round to look again, only to find the other had turned too.

It was the person whose photograph he had in his pocket.

A moment's hesitation, then the young man stepped up to the inspector.

"Are you the detective from Paris?"

"You're Gérard Piedbœuf, aren't you?"

The detective from Paris! He was getting used to the phrase, and he knew by now exactly what it meant. Machère had been sent over from Nancy to take charge of the case. He was there by right, and anyone who had any information to give, went straight to him to give it.

Maigret, on the other hand, was "the detective from Paris," an interloper who had been called in by the Belgians for the sole purpose of whitewashing them. And whenever he was recognized in the street, the glances that were turned on him were anything but friendly.

"Are you coming from our house?"

"No. But I was there this morning earlier. I missed your father, however. He'd already turned in."

Gérard was no longer quite so young as in the photograph. He was still very young both in face and figure, and in the way he dressed, but, looking closely at him, you could see he was on the wrong side of twenty-five.

"Did you want to see me?" he asked.

Whatever his faults were, shyness was not one of them. His eyes looked steadily into Maigret's. Brilliant, dark brown eyes, eyes which would certainly win favour with women, particularly with his olive complexion and well-drawn mouth.

"Oh! I've hardly got down to work yet. . . ."

"On behalf of the Peeters; I know. Everybody knows. In fact, it was known all over the town before you ever set foot in the place. They say you're a friend of the family and are making it your business to prove . . ."

"To prove nothing at all! . . . Ah! There's your father getting up."

They could see the little house. On the first floor a blind was pulled up and a man with a heavy grey moustache was just visible looking out of the window.

"He's seen us," said Gérard. "He'll soon be dressed."

"Do you know the Peeters personally?"

They started walking up and down the quay, from one bollard to the next, about a hundred yards from the Flemish shop. The air was keen. Gérard's overcoat was too thin, but as he obviously liked the cut of it, he probably didn't mind.

"What do you mean?"

"For three years or more your sister was Joseph Peeters' mistress. Was she received in his house?"

The other shrugged his shoulders.

"Have we got to go through the whole story in detail? . . . First of all—that is, just before the child was born—Joseph swore he'd marry her. . . . Then Dr. Van de Weert came and offered my sister ten thousand francs to clear right out and never come back. . . . The first time Germaine went out after having the baby was to take it round to the Peeters to show it them. They made a frightful scene, and the old woman called her all the names she could think of. . . . After that, things got a bit better. And Joseph was all the time promising to marry her. . . . Only, he kept on saying that he must pass his exams first. . . ."

"And you?"

"Me?"

At first he pretended not to understand. Then all at once he changed his tune. The smile that came to his lips was both conceited and sarcastic as he went on:

"Has anybody told you anything?"

Without pausing in his stride, Maigret took the photograph from his pocket and showed it to his companion.

"Heavens! I'd never have thought that was still in existence!"

He raised his hand to take it, but the inspector put it back in his pocket.

"Did she give it you? . . . No. It's impossible. She's too proud. . . . Unless . . . Now . . ."

During the conversation Maigret never took his eyes off Gérard. Was he tuberculous, like his sister? It was hard to say. But he certainly had the kind of attractiveness that so often goes with consumption—finely chiselled features, good complexion—with lips that were sensual and slightly derisive.

He was well dressed in a cheap way. Without waiting for the body to be found, he had put a crêpe armlet on his beige overcoat.

"Did you make love to her?"

"It's an old story. It happened long ago—before Germaine had the kid. It must be at least four years ago. . . ."

"Go on. . . ."

"There's my father on the doorstep taking a breath of fresh air."

"Go on, all the same."

"It was on a Sunday. . . . The Peeters were taking Germaine to the Rochefort Caves. But at the last moment one of the sisters dropped out and I was asked to make up the party. . . . They're about fifteen miles away. . . . We had a picnic. We laughed a lot. I was in very good form. . . . Then, after lunch, we paired off. Joseph and Germaine, Anna and me. We wandered about in the woods."

Maigret's eye still rested heavily on him, but it expressed nothing.

"And then?"

"And then! . . . Yes. . . ."

A silly and rather unpleasant smile spread over Gérard's face.

"I really couldn't tell you just how it happened. I don't waste much time when it comes to that sort of thing, and she was taken unawares."

Maigret put a hand on the young man's shoulder, and spoke the words slowly:

"Is that true?"

Yes, it was true. Maigret was convinced of it. Anna would have been twenty-two at the time.

"And then?"

"Nothing more. Look at her! What would you expect me to do with a girl like that? . . . In the train she stared at me the whole time, and it was obvious that the less I had to do with her the better."

"What did she do about it?"

"Nothing. I avoided her, and she must have understood. For if ever I ran into her in the street her eyes were like a pair of revolvers."

They were approaching the Piedbœufs' house now. Gérard's father, in his carpet slippers, came a few steps to meet them.

"I hear you called this morning. . . . Won't you come in? Have you told the inspector all about it, Gérard?"

Maigret went into the passage. The staircase looked as though it was made of matchwood. Everything was poor and ugly. The kitchen was the only sitting-room. Its table was covered with American cloth with a large blue pattern.

"Who killed her?" asked Piedbœuf, whose intelligence was evidently of a low grade. "She went off, saying she'd had no news of Joseph for weeks and that he was a month behindhand. . . ."

"A month behindhand?"

"Yes. He's been paying a hundred francs a month all along on account of the child. He couldn't do less, could he? You see, it's like this. . . ."

Fearing his father was going to embark on a long rigmarole, Gérard quickly intervened.

"The inspector isn't interested in all that. What he wants are facts. And there's one fact that can't be got away from, and that is, that Joseph Peeters was here on the evening of the 3rd, however much he may swear he wasn't."

"You're referring to the man who says he saw his motor-bike? I'm afraid that's not much good now. Another fellow passed this way a little after eight that evening, and he was riding a motor-bike of the same make."

"Ah!"

And more aggressively:

"Just what we thought! You're on their side."

"I'm not on anybody's side. I'm merely trying to find out what happened."

But Gérard only sneered. Turning to his father, he went on:

"The inspector's only come here to see if he can trip us up."

And then to Maigret:

"You'll excuse me, won't you? Lunch is ready, and I have to be back in the office by two."

What was the good of arguing? Maigret cast a final look round him, caught sight of a child's cot in the next room, then walked along the passage and let himself out.

* * * *

Machère was waiting for him at the *Hôtel de la Meuse*. The commercial travellers were having lunch in a small room, separated from the café by a partition with a glass-panelled door. But meals were also served, for those who preferred it, on the marble tables of the café itself, and there were a few people eating as Maigret entered.

Machère was not alone. Sitting at the same table, with an *apéritif* before him, was a short man with a monstrously long moustache and arms as long as a hunchback's. Both men stood up as Maigret approached.

"The skipper of the *Etoile Polaire*, Gustave Cassin," announced Machère, whose eyes shone brightly.

Maigret sat down. A glance at the saucers that had accumulated in two little piles told him they had had three drinks apiece.

"Cassin has something to tell you."

Indeed he had! He was bursting with it. With an air of great importance he leant over towards the inspector.

"Say what you've got to say—that's right, isn't it? Only,

no need to say it till you're asked to. That's what my father used to say. No need to go butting in."

"*Un demi!*" called out Maigret, ordering a glass of beer.

He pushed his bowler on to the back of his head and unbuttoned his overcoat. Then, while the bargee was groping for his words, he cut in:

"If my information's correct, on the night of the 3rd you were drunk as a lord."

"Not as drunk as all that. Not by any means. I'd had two or three glasses, but I could walk straight. And what's more, I could see straight."

"Did you see a motor-bike draw up at the Flemish shop?"

"Me? . . . Certainly not."

Machère made a sign to Maigret not to interrupt the man, to whom he nodded encouragingly.

"I saw a woman on the quay. . . . And I can tell you which one it was. The one who never serves in the shop and who takes the train every day. . . ."

"Maria?"

"She might be called Maria, but I don't know anything about that. But I know it was the thin one, with fair hair. . . . And now tell me this: is it natural she should be wandering about on the quay in a wind sharp enough to go right through you?"

"What time was it?"

"The time I was going back to bed. It might have been eight o'clock; it might have been later."

"Did she see you?"

"No. For instead of going straight on as I was going, I slipped behind the customs house and watched. I thought it could only be a man as could bring a girl out on a night like that, and I thought I might see a bit of fun."

"You've been had up, I hear, for assaulting girls."

Cassin grinned, showing a horrible set of rotten teeth. He might have been any age. His face was heavily lined, but the hair, which grew low on his forehead, was not yet turning grey.

He was eager to know the effect he was producing. After each sentence he looked at Maigret, then at Machère, then at a man sitting at the next table, who was listening to the conversation.

"Go on."

"She wasn't looking for a man. . . . She was looking to see there was *nobody*!"

Cassin paused to let the words sink in. He swallowed down his drink in one mouthful and called out to the waiter:

"The same again."

Then out it came:

"She was looking to see the coast was clear. And then some other people came out of the house—by the back door. And they were carrying something long. Long and heavy it was. And they threw it into the Meuse, just between my boat and the *Deux Frères*, which was the next one downstream."

"Waiter! The bill, please."

Maigret didn't seem in the least astonished. Machère was disconcerted, and so was the bargee.

"Come along with me."

"Where?"

"Never mind. Come."

"But I'm waiting for the drink I ordered."

Maigret waited patiently till it was brought and duly swallowed. Then, telling the landlord he'd be back for lunch a few minutes later, he took the old drunkard out on to the quay.

The latter was deserted at that time of the day, everybody having returned home for lunch. Big drops of rain began to fall. Machère had followed them out.

"Now! Show me exactly where you stood."

He was already familiar with the customs house. He watched Cassin take station in a corner.

"And you didn't budge from there?"

"I should think not. I didn't want to get mixed up in anything."

"Come out of it!"

And Maigret went and stood in his place.

He didn't stay there many seconds. Then, looking straight at Cassin, he said:

"You'll have to think of something better than that, my friend."

"What do you mean?"

"I mean what I say. In other words: it won't wash. . . . From that corner you can't see the shop at all, nor the bit of the river you spoke of."

"When I said I was there, I meant . . ."

"That'll do! I tell you, you've got to think up something better than that. When you have, you can come and see me again! And if it doesn't hold water . . . Well! There's a very good chance of your being locked up again."

Machère was crestfallen. He in turn took up his position in the corner. What Maigret had said was incontestable.

"You're quite right," he groaned.

As for the bargee, he didn't say another word. With lowered head, he stared at Maigret's feet, and his eyes were venomous.

"Don't forget what I've told you. If your next story isn't more plausible than that, we'll clap you in gaol. . . . Come along, Machère. . . ."

And Maigret turned on his heel and made for the bridge, filling his pipe as he went.

"Do you think Cassin . . . ?"

"I think it won't be very long before he's back again with another story to incriminate the Peeters."

"All the same . . . We have to listen to evidence. If he's got any . . ."

"He certainly will have!"

"What evidence?"

"How should I know? . . . But he'll think of something."

"To clear himself?"

But Maigret changed the subject by asking for some matches, having used all his own trying vainly to light his pipe in the wind.

"I'm sorry. I haven't any. I don't smoke."

Machère wasn't sure what Maigret said next, but it sounded rather like:

"I ought to have known it!"

Chapter V

AT THE *CAFÉ DE LA MAIRIE*

THE rain had started at lunch-time. It had increased before dark, and by eight o'clock had turned into a downpour.

The streets of Givet were empty. The barges glistened with wet. Maigret, with his coat collar turned up, trudged along towards the Flemish shop, pushed open the door, ringing the now familiar bell, and plunged into the warm atmosphere of coffee and spices.

It was at that time of the day on the 3rd of January that Germaine Piedbœuf had entered the shop, never to be seen by her family again.

Maigret hadn't noticed before that the door to the kitchen was panelled with glass. A muslin curtain was drawn across it, so that he could hardly make out the people on the other side.

Someone got up.

"All right! It's only me."

And he walked straight through into the kitchen, thrusting himself abruptly into the private life of the family. It was Madame Peeters who had risen to go and serve in the shop. Her husband was in his wicker chair, as usual, so close to the stove that he looked in danger of catching fire. He was holding a clay pipe with a long stem of wild cherry, but he wasn't smoking. His eyes were shut and his mouth half-open, and his breathing came regularly.

As for Anna, she was sitting at the deal table, scrubbed

with silver sand and polished with the years. She was totting up figures in a little account-book.

"Take the inspector into the sitting-room, Anna."

"Please don't move," answered Maigret. "I've only looked in for a moment."

"Well, take your coat off, anyhow."

Another thing the inspector noticed for the first time was that Madame Peeters had a beautiful voice. It was low, grave, and caressing, and the Flemish accent made it all the more attractive.

"And you'll have some coffee, won't you?"

He wondered what Madame Peeters had been doing before his arrival, but the question was no sooner formulated than it was answered by the evening paper lying on the table and the steel-rimmed glasses that had been hastily put down.

He had butted in on a typically homely scene. The old man's breathing seemed like the pulse of this quiet house. Anna shut up her account-book and fetched a cup and saucer from the dresser.

"I was hoping to see your sister."

Madame Peeters shook her head sadly, while Anna explained:

"I'm afraid you won't be seeing her for some days. That is, unless you go to Namur. One of the mistresses, who also lives at Givet, called a little while ago to tell us that Maria was laid up. When she got out of the train this morning, she slipped and sprained her ankle."

"Where is she?"

"At the convent. They've put her up."

Still shaking her head, Madame Peeters sighed:

"I don't know what we've done for God to send us all this trouble."

"And Joseph?"

"He won't be back again till Saturday. . . . But I was forgetting—that's tomorrow."

"Have you seen any more of Marguerite?"

"Only in church. At Vespers."

Steaming coffee was poured into his cup. Madame Peeters disappeared for a moment, returning with a wine-glass and a bottle of gin.

"It's old Schiedam schnapps."

Maigret sat down. He wasn't expecting to find out anything. In fact, his presence there was not wholly a matter of duty.

The house reminded him of Holland. His thoughts ran back to the case which had taken him to Delfzijl. Certainly there were differences. But here was the same calm, the same density of the air, the same feeling that the atmosphere was not fluid, but was composed of some solid substance that would be shattered if you moved.

Now and again the old man's chair creaked, though he never moved. With his patient, even breathing he seemed not so much to be living as marking time.

Anna said something in Flemish, the meaning of which Maigret guessed as:

"You ought to have brought a bigger glass."

From time to time a man in sabots would pass along the quay. The rain could be heard pattering on the shop window.

"I think you said it was raining on the third? Was it raining as hard as it is now?"

"Yes. I think so."

The two women had resumed their seats. They watched Maigret raise his glass to his lips. In fact, Anna's eyes never left him.

Her features were not so delicate as her mother's. Nor did she possess her mother's benevolent, indulgent smile.

Had she missed the photograph he had pinched from her room? Probably not. Surely her face would have betrayed it.

"It's thirty-five years since we came here," said Madame Peeters. "We started off with just the wicker business. Then we added the shop, and then we built another story on the house."

But Maigret's mind was wandering. He was picturing Anna four years younger, walking in the woods with Gérard Piedbœuf.

How had it happened? What sudden streak of wildness had assailed her? Or was Gérard really the expert hand he made himself out to be? What had she thought about it afterwards?

One thing Maigret felt pretty sure of. It was the one and only adventure of her life, and would always remain so.

There was something overpowering about the atmosphere of this house. Partly as a result of the schnapps, a dull warm glow gradually pervaded his brain. All the same, his senses were acutely alive. Not a sound escaped him—a little squeak from the wicker chair, a gentle snore from the old man, the slightest increase or decrease in the pattering rain. . . .

"Would you like to play me that piece again?" he asked Anna. "The one you played this morning."

She was on the point of protesting, but her mother chimed in:

"Yes. Do. . . . She plays well, doesn't she? She had three lessons a week for six years from the best teacher in Givet."

Anna went into the sitting-room, leaving the two doors open behind her. They could hear her opening the piano, then her right hand running casually over the keys.

"She ought to sing," murmured Madame Peeters.

"Though, of course, Marguerite has a better voice. There was even a question of her taking it up properly and going to the conservatoire."

The notes swelled in the quiet house. Anna had started playing. The old man still slept unheeding, and his wife, fearing he might drop his pipe, took it gently from his hand and hung it on a nail in the wall.

What was Maigret doing there? Was he working? Was he following some clue?

Madame Peeters listened, glancing frequently at her paper, which she would have liked to go on with. Another person ought to have been sitting at that table—Maria correcting her pupils' exercises.

And that was all.

Or would have been, if all the town hadn't been accusing them of a ghastly murder, committed on just such an evening as this.

Maigret started at the sound of the shop bell. For a second, he could almost have fancied that he was three weeks younger and that this was Germaine Piedbœuf come to claim her little monthly allowance of a hundred francs.

It was a bargee in oilskins, who produced a little bottle for Madame Peeters to fill with gin.

"Eight francs."

"In Belgian money?"

"No. In French. Or ten Belgian francs if you'd rather."

Maigret got up and crossed the shop.

"Are you going already?"

"I'll be looking in again tomorrow."

Outside he saw the bargee making towards his boat. The inspector turned round to look at the house. With its shop window lit up, it looked like a stage setting, largely because of the music, faintly audible behind the scenes.

Gentle, sentimental music. Anna was singing now:

"*Mais tu me reviendras,*
Ô mon beau fiancé."

Maigret splashed through the puddles. The drenching rain soon put his pipe out.

And now it was the whole of Givet which looked like a stage setting. The bargee had disappeared, and he was thus the only person left on the stage. All round him, nothing but the subdued lights showing through curtained windows, and the roar of the rushing Meuse, which gradually obliterated the music.

When he had gone some two hundred yards or so, he had both houses in sight. Behind him, the Flemish shop; on the right, close to, the Piedbœufs' cottage.

There was no light upstairs, but the passage was lit up. The child would be in bed now. Would anybody else be in the house? Not much fun for a young man like Gérard, sitting there all alone. Or perhaps the midwife . . .

Maigret was fed up. Rarely had he had such a feeling of the futility of what he was about.

Indeed, what was he about? He hadn't been sent there. The Peeters were accused of murdering a girl, but there was nothing whatever to show she was even dead.

Perhaps she'd had as much as she could stand of her dismal life in Givet. Perhaps she'd cleared out. Perhaps she was at that moment in Brussels, Rheims, or Paris, having a drink with friends she'd picked up.

Even if she was dead, it didn't necessarily mean she'd been killed. What sort of a reception had the Peeters given her? Had they made her despair of ever marrying Joseph? And had she gone straight out and thrown herself into the river?

No proof. Not even a decent clue. Wasn't Machère doing all he could? Yet he wasn't getting anywhere, and it

looked as though the case would in the end simply be pigeon-holed unsolved.

Why should Maigret have allowed himself to become involved in it? Once more: what was he doing there? There was no doubt of the answer most people in Givet would have given to that question! He had been hired by the Belgians to whitewash them!

Just opposite him, on the other bank of the river, was the factory, whose yard was lit up by a single electric lamp. The only other light came from the night-watchman's lodge at the gate.

Old Piedbœuf would be on duty now. What would he do with himself to pass the night away?

And without exactly knowing why, Maigret, with his hands deep in his overcoat pockets, made straight for the bridge. In the bar he'd been in that morning, the bargees and tug skippers were talking so loudly that their words carried right across the quay, but he didn't stop.

The wind made the girders of the steel bridge vibrate. It had been built to replace the old stone one destroyed during the war. On the other side, the quay wasn't even paved, and Maigret had to plough his way through the mud. A stray dog was sheltering close in under the whitewashed wall.

As Maigret approached the gate, Piedbœuf's face appeared at the door of the lodge.

"Good evening," said Maigret.

The man was wearing an old military tunic dyed black. He was smoking a pipe. In the middle of the room was a small round stove, whose stove-pipe, after a couple of elbows, went out through the wall.

"You know, it's not allowed . . ."

"To come in here at night. Never mind! It's all right," and the inspector went in.

A wooden bench. A cane-seated chair. Maigret's overcoat began to steam.

"Do you spend the whole night in here?"

"Except when I'm going the rounds. That's three times during the watch."

At a distance, his moustache was rather imposing, but close to, he was far from being impressive. A timid man, one might almost say shrinking, dominated by an abiding sense of his own lowly station.

He was ill at ease in Maigret's presence, and did not know what to say to him.

"So you spend most of your life alone. . . . At night, here. The mornings in bed. . . . What do you do with your afternoons?"

"Gardening."

"I didn't know you had a garden."

"I do the midwife's. We share the vegetables."

Maigret noticed some mounds in the cinders. Investigating with a poker, he discovered potatoes in their skins.

He could picture the man in the middle of the night, eating his baked potatoes as he stared vacantly into space.

"Does your son ever come to keep you company?"

"Never."

An irregular trickle of raindrops dripped down from the roof outside the door.

"Do you really think your daughter was killed?"

Piedbœuf did not answer at once. His eye flitted restlessly from one object to another.

"If Gérard says so. . . ."

And all at once, with a sob in his throat:

"She'd never have killed herself. . . . And she'd never have gone off. . . ."

A sudden note of tragedy that had been quite unexpected. The old man knocked out his pipe and refilled it, but his thoughts seemed far away.

"Do you know Joseph Peeters well?"

Piedbœuf turned his head away.

"Well enough to know he'd never marry her. There's money in that family . . . while we . . ."

On the wall was a beautiful electric clock, the only luxurious thing in the little shelter. On the opposite wall was a blackboard on which had been chalked: *No hands wanted.*

"It's time I was going the rounds."

Maigret nearly offered to come with him, not that he particularly wanted to see the factory, but he would have liked to know more of the old watchman. The latter put on a loose oilskin, which reached down to his heels, and picked up a storm-lantern which was already burning, so that all he had to do was to turn up the wick.

"What I don't understand is why you should be against us . . . though I suppose it's natural enough. . . . Gérard says . . ."

But they were outside now, and the conversation was put a stop to by the rain and the wind. Piedbœuf accompanied his visitor to the gate. Looking through it, Maigret had a fresh vision of Givet, a vision divided into vertical strips by the iron bars. The barges lying alongside the other bank of the river; the Flemish shop with its window still lit up; the quay with its lamps every fifty yards, each with a halo of light made by the rain; the town beyond. . . .

The customs houses stood out quite clearly, and it was easy to make out the corner of the little side-street whose second house on the left was the Piedbœufs'.

The 3rd of January . . .

"Has your wife been dead long?"

"It'll be twelve years next month. It was chest trouble that took her."

"What would Gérard be doing at this time of the evening?"

The lantern swung slightly at the end of the watchman's arm. He had already put a large key in the lock of the little side-gate, which he had to lock up before going his rounds. A train whistled in the distance.

"He'll be knocking about somewhere in the town."

"I suppose you don't know where?"

"The young people mostly get together at the *Café de la Mairie*."

And Maigret trudged off again through the darkness and the mud. This didn't seem like a case at all. There was really nothing to go on. Nothing whatever.

It was only a handful of people that he had to do with in this little wind-swept town. Each of them went about his business in the usual way. Perhaps all of them were perfectly sincere in what they told him.

One of them, on the other hand, was perhaps a tortured soul suffering an agony of dread at the thought of Maigret's massive figure prowling about the streets that night.

He came to his hotel, but did not go in. Through the window, he could see Machère holding forth to a group of men who were doubtless at their fourth or fifth round. The landlord was amongst them—in fact, he was apparently standing another round at that moment.

Machère was gesticulating. He was obviously in good form. He was probably saying:

"These inspectors who come from Paris haven't the faintest idea. . . ."

And of course they were talking of the Belgians, tearing them to ribbons.

At the end of a narrow street was a fairly spacious square. In one corner, a white-painted café with three windows brightly lit up. It was the *Café de la Mairie*.

The door opened on to a hum of conversation. A bar covered with zinc. Marble-topped tables, on some of which were the usual little squares of red baize for the card-players. The air thick with pipe and cigarette-smoke and a sour smell of beer.

"*Deux demis, deux!*"

Orders were shouted out to the waiter, who hurried backwards and forwards in his white apron.

Sitting down at the first table he came to, Maigret immediately caught sight of Gérard Piedbœuf in one of the misty mirrors on the wall. He too, like Machère, was holding forth, but he stopped abruptly at the sight of the inspector, nudging his companions, who all looked in the latter's direction.

There were three at the table besides him. A young man and two girls, the latter no doubt factory-girls.

All round, the buzz of conversation died down. Even the card-players made their calls in subdued voices, while glances from all sides were turned on the newcomer.

"*Un demi, un,*" ordered Maigret.

And Gérard Piedbœuf, with a scornful smile on his face, muttered half-audibly:

"The Belgians' friend. . . ."

He had been drinking, certainly. His eyes were too brilliant. His purple lips exaggerated the pallor of his complexion. He was obviously excited, and was in the mood to play to the gallery. He groped for something appropriate to say.

"You know, Ninie, one day, when you're a rich woman, you'll have nothing to be afraid of—particularly from the police."

His neighbour kicked him under the table, to make him shut up, but the result was only to spur him on.

"What are you kicking me for? . . . Isn't this a free country? Can't you say what you think? . . . I'm not afraid to speak my mind anyhow, and I tell you that if you've got money the police will eat out of your hand, but if you haven't . . ."

But he hadn't quite as much nerve as he pretended. He looked a bit white about the gills. Really he was scared by his own audacity, but the desire to show off was stronger.

Maigret flicked away the foam which covered his beer and took a deep draught. The silence would have been absolute if it hadn't been for the card-players.

"High tierce!"

"Four knaves!"

"Your deal!"

"Cut, will you?"

And the two little factory-girls, who didn't dare turn towards the inspector, shifted in their seats so as to be able to watch him in the glass.

"It seems to be a crime in France to be a Frenchman—particularly if you're poor. . . ."

The proprietor, sitting at the cash-desk, frowned and threw appealing glances at Maigret, as though begging him to understand that the young man was drunk. But Maigret didn't even notice him.

"*Et pique! . . . Et encore pique*," said a card-player triumphantly. "You weren't expecting that, were you?"

"People who've made a fortune out of smuggling," went on Gérard, taking care everybody could hear him. "There's not a person in Givet that doesn't know it. . . . It used to be cigars and lace. And now that spirits are forbidden in Belgium they can do a roaring trade in gin with the bargees. . . . It's not difficult, that way, to make your son a lawyer. . . . Just

as well for him he is a lawyer. He'll need all the tricks of the trade when they put him in the dock."

Maigret sat all by himself at his table, the focus of all eyes. He hadn't taken off his overcoat, and the raindrops glistened on his shoulders.

It certainly looked as though it would end in a scuffle, and the proprietor came up to the inspector in an attempt to smooth things over.

"I hope you won't take any notice. He's been drinking. . . . And the loss of his sister . . ."

"Come on, Gérard! Let's go," said one of the factory-girls anxiously.

"What for? Do you think I'm afraid?"

Gérard's back was turned towards Maigret, and they could only see each other by means of the mirrors.

The card-players were only playing half-heartedly, making mistakes, and forgetting to score.

"Some brandy!" ordered Gérard. "Liqueur brandy. . . ."

The proprietor was on the point of refusing, but he didn't want to precipitate a scene. He looked enquiringly towards Maigret, but the latter made no sign.

"A dirty, filthy, rotten business! . . . First of all they take our girls, and then cut their throats when they've had enough of them. . . . And the police . . ."

But Maigret was picturing the night-watchman going round the workshops in his uniform tunic, dyed black, with his storm-lantern to light him on his way. How long would it take for those potatoes to cook?

His mind wandered back to the town side of the river. The Piedbœufs' house. The child sleeping in its railed-in cot. The midwife knitting or reading the paper, waiting till Gérard came home.

Further off, the Flemish shop. They'd have woken up

the old man and taken him upstairs to bed. Madame Peeters pulling down the shutters. Anna all alone, undressing in her room.

And the barges sleeping in the Meuse, bumping each other, straining at their hawsers, their rudders creaking, the water swirling under their keels.

"Waiter! Another *demi*!"

Maigret's voice was calm. He smoked away slowly at his pipe, blowing little puffs towards the ceiling.

"Just look at him! Sitting there sneering. . . ."

The proprietor was at his wits' end. There was obviously going to be a row, and he felt impotent to stop it.

For Gérard had risen as he spoke and was now facing Maigret. His features were drawn, his lips twisted with anger.

"I tell you, that's all you came to Givet for—just to make fools of us all. Look at him! Sneering away! . . . All because I've had a glass or two . . . or rather, because I haven't as much money as some people. . . ."

"Hearts!" declared a card-player, trying to create a diversion.

But he was punished for his pains, for Gérard snatched the cards out of his hand and sent them flying across the room.

Half the customers were on their feet by now. They did not know what to do, but held themselves ready to intervene as soon as the sparks began to fly.

But Maigret remained quietly in his place, puffing slowly at his pipe.

"Look at him, I tell you! He's sneering at the lot of us. He knows perfectly well my sister's been murdered."

The proprietor hovered nervously about. The two little factory-girls exchanged anxious glances and their eyes measured the distance to the door.

"He doesn't dare open his mouth! What could he say if he did? He'd only make the truth stick out the plainer."

"I assure you he's drunk," pleaded the proprietor piteously, seeing Maigret at last rise from his chair.

But nothing could stop it now. Poor Gérard! He was more scared than anybody, as Maigret's sombre and ponderous mass advanced towards him.

Gérard's right hand dived swiftly into a pocket, and at the same moment a woman screamed.

For what emerged from the pocket was a revolver. It didn't remain long, however, in Gérard's hand. A lightning grab from Maigret, a swift movement of his foot, and the young man tripped and went sprawling on the floor.

Everybody was standing now. Yet not one person in three realized what had happened. All they could see now was a revolver in the inspector's hand and Gérard on the floor.

And while Maigret slipped the revolver in his pocket as simply and naturally as if it had been his tobacco-pouch, the young man snarled:

"You're going to arrest me, I suppose?"

He had risen no further than on to his hands and knees. He cut a truly pitiful figure.

"Run along," said Maigret quietly, "and go to bed."

And, as Gérard didn't appear to understand, he added:

"Open the door, someone!"

A blast of cool air blew into the suffocating atmosphere. Holding him by the shoulder, Maigret pushed Gérard out into the street.

"Run along. . . ."

The door closed. There was one person the less in the café: Gérard Piedbœuf.

"He'll sleep it off," muttered Maigret, returning to his table and sitting down in front of his glass of beer.

There was an awkward silence. Some people were sitting down again. Others hesitated.

Maigret drank a mouthful of beer, then sighed:

"Never mind! It's all in the day's work!"

Then, turning to one of the card-players, he added:

"I think you said hearts were trumps. . . ."

The man didn't know quite what to answer, seeing that his cards still lay scattered on the floor!

Chapter VI

THE HAMMER

MAIGRET had decided to take it easy the following morning. It wasn't really laziness, but rather that he didn't know what to do with himself. Ten o'clock had just struck when he was woken up in a disagreeable manner.

First of all there was a violent knocking on his door, a thing he detested at the best of times. And then, as he slowly came to his senses, the first thing that greeted them was the patter of rain on the balcony.

"Who is it?"

"Machère."

The name came through the door like a triumphal trumpet-blast.

"Come in!"

And then:

"Draw back the curtains, will you?"

Maigret lay in bed, while the room was suddenly flooded by the raw light of a thoroughly nasty day. Beneath his window a fishwife was trying to palm off her wares on the landlord of the hotel.

"I've some news for you. It came by the first post."

"Just a moment. Would you mind shouting down the stairs and telling them to send up my breakfast? The bell doesn't work."

Maigret reached for his pipe that lay ready filled within reach.

"News of what?"

"Of Germaine Piedbœuf."

"Dead?"

"Dead as mutton."

Machère said it with the utmost satisfaction, at the same time drawing from his pocket a four-page letter on foolscap, adorned with all manner of official stamps.

It had been passed on from one authority to another. Machère ran through the headings:

"*Transmis par le Parquet de Huy au Ministère de l'Intérieur à Bruxelles.*

"*Transmis par le Ministère de l'Intérieur à la Sûreté Générale à Paris.*

"*Transmis par la Sûreté Générale à la Brigade Mobile de Nancy.*

"*Transmis à . . .*"

"Cut it short, will you, old man?"

"Very well. What it boils down to is this . . . the body was fished out of the Meuse at Huy—that's about seventy or seventy-five miles from here. It was found five days ago. . . . Of course I'd had a notice sent out to all police stations along the river, but they'd forgotten about it and . . ."

"Can I come in?"

It was the maid with the coffee and the *croissants*. As soon as she had gone, Machère started off again.

"But I'd better read it to you. . . . *This twenty-sixth day of January, one thousand nine hundred and . . .*"

"No, old chap! For heaven's sake come to the point."

"Well, it seems practically certain that she was murdered. It's no longer a moral certainty, but a material one. Listen to this:

"*The body, as far as can be judged, has been in the water about ten days or a fortnight. Its state of . . .*"

"Oh, come on!" groaned Maigret with his mouth full.

"*. . . decomposition . . .*"

"Yes. I know. But let's come to the conclusions and skip the description."

"There's a whole page of it."

"Of what?"

"Description. . . . Very well, then—if you don't want to hear it. . . . They seem a little doubtful on some points. But one thing is quite certain: Germaine Piedbœuf was dead for a considerable time before being immersed in water. The medical report says: *two to three days. . . .*"

Maigret was dipping his *croissant* into his coffee and munching pensively, while staring out of the window. In fact, Machère broke off, thinking he was no longer listening.

"Of course . . . if this doesn't interest you . . ."

"Go on!"

"There's a detailed account of the post-mortem. Would you like to hear it? No? Then we come straight to the most interesting part. The skull was found to be bashed in in one place, and the doctors say it was done by some blunt instrument, like a hammer, and that in all probability this was the cause of death."

Maigret thrust one leg out of the bed, then the other. He stared at himself in the glass for a moment before starting to lather his face. While he shaved, Machère went on reading from the typewritten document in his hands.

"Don't you think it's extraordinary? . . . I don't mean about the hammer, but the fact that the body was only thrown into the water two or three days after the crime. I shall have to go and have another look over the house."

"Do they give a list of the clothing found on the body?"

"Yes. . . . One moment. . . . Here it is. . . . *Black shoes with a strap across the instep, soles and heels fairly worn. Black stockings. Pink underclothes of poor quality. Black serge dress (no maker's name).*"

"Is that all? . . . No overcoat?"

"No. . . . That's funny."

"It was the 3rd of January, cold and raining."

Machère's face clouded.

"Admittedly . . ."

"Admittedly what?"

"She wasn't on such friendly terms with the Peeters that she'd be invited to take off her coat. . . . On the other hand, if they'd removed it, why didn't they strip her completely, so as to make identification harder?"

Maigret washed so vigorously that he even splashed Machère in the middle of the room.

"Do the Piedbœufs know?"

"Not yet. I thought perhaps you'd like to . . ."

"To do nothing of the sort! Don't forget I'm not here officially. You carry on just as if I'd never come."

He hunted for his collar-stud, and at last finished dressing.

"I must be off now," he said, pushing Machère out of the door. "I'll see you again later."

* * * *

He walked along aimlessly. He had come out just to be out of doors, or, more precisely, to plunge once more into the atmosphere of the town, and he didn't care where his legs carried him. It was just a matter of luck that he suddenly found himself staring at a brass plate on which was engraved:

Docteur VAN DE WEERT
Consultations de dix heures à midi

A few minutes later, in spite of the three patients who sat waiting their turn, he was ushered into the presence of a little man, whose complexion was childishly pink, and whose hair was as beautifully white as Madame Peeters'.

"I'm glad to see you, Inspector. But I hope it's nothing disagreeable. . . ."

He rubbed his hands together as he spoke. A buoyant optimism radiated from his whole person.

"My daughter told me about you. It's very kind of you to . . ."

"I'd like first of all to ask you a question: Does it require much force to smash a woman's skull with a hammer?"

The little man's consternation was a sight to see. He wore a morning-coat of a cut that had long been out of fashion. A massive watch-chain was stretched across his stomach.

"A woman's skull? . . . How should I know? At Givet, I've never had occasion to consider such a question."

"Do you think, for instance, that a woman would be strong enough?"

It was altogether too much for the doctor, who gesticulated excitedly.

"A woman? . . . My dear sir! . . . You're surely not suggesting that a woman would think of . . .?"

"Are you a widower, Dr. Van de Weert?"

"I have been for twenty years. Fortunately my daughter . . ."

"What do you think of Joseph Peeters?"

"What could I think? He's an excellent fellow. . . . I would certainly have preferred him to take up medicine, as he could have taken over my practice. . . . But there you are. He seems to be gifted for law. And it's a fine profession."

"What about his health?"

"Quite all right. Of course he's been working very hard, and he may be a bit run down. And then being so tall. . . . He shot up a bit too quickly, perhaps. . . ."

"There's no taint in the Peeters family?"

"A taint?"

He pronounced the word with such alarm that one might have thought he'd never heard of hereditary diseases.

"Really, Inspector! Your questions take me rather by surprise. You've seen my cousin, Madame Peeters. If you ask me, she'll live to a hundred."

"And your daughter?"

"She's more delicate. She takes after her mother. . . . May I offer you a cigar?"

A real Flemish type. He could have stepped straight out of a picture or an advertisement for some brand of schnapps. Full, bright red lips, and clear blue eyes that revealed all the simplicity of his soul.

"And Mademoiselle Marguerite was due to marry Joseph?"

The doctor's face clouded ever so slightly.

"Yes. We were expecting them to marry one day or another. If it hadn't been for this . . . this unfortunate . . ."

He couldn't find the right word for it. But for him it was just something unfortunate.

"Strange, isn't it?" he went on. "They couldn't see how much better it would be for everybody for the girl to accept a little pension for herself and the child, and if possible to go and live in some other town. . . . As a matter of fact, I think it was her brother who was at the bottom of it all."

Maigret hadn't the heart to condemn him. He was so obviously sincere, so obviously well-meaning. His very innocence blinded him to all the harsher realities of life.

"To say nothing of the fact that the child was never proved to be Joseph's. . . . If we'd found a good home for her and the child . . ."

"So your daughter was waiting till it had all blown over?"

Van de Weert smiled.

"She's been in love with him from the age of fourteen. Beautiful, isn't it? . . . And it wasn't for me to raise objec-

tions. . . . Have you got a match? . . . If you want my candid opinion, there hasn't been any crime at all. That girl has always been running after men, and now she's suddenly gone off with one. And her brother's making the most of her disappearance, hoping to make a good thing out of it. . . ."

It didn't occur to him to ask Maigret's opinion. He was quite convinced his version was the right one. He pricked his ears as sounds reached them from the waiting-room. No doubt the patients were getting restive.

And with an eye as innocent as the doctor's, the inspector calmly asked his final question:

"Do you think Mademoiselle Marguerite is Joseph's mistress?"

Van de Weert came very near to being indignant. The blood mounted to his forehead. But the feeling that gained the upper hand was one of sadness that anyone could be so uncomprehending.

"Marguerite? . . . Are you mad? . . . Who could ever have invented such a thing? . . . That Marguerite should be the . . . the . . ."

Maigret's hand was already on the handle of the door, and without so much as a smile he took his leave and went out. In the house was a mixed smell of cooking and pharmaceutics. The maid who hastened to open the front door was as fresh as if she'd just stepped out of a hot bath.

Outside, he was once more in the rain and the mud. Passing lorries splashed the pedestrians.

It was Saturday. Joseph Peeters was due that afternoon, and he'd be staying till the following evening. In the *Café des Mariniers* a lively discussion was going on, for news had just come through from the *Ponts-et-Chaussées* that the river was now open to navigation from the frontier right down to Maestricht.

Only, on account of the strength of the current, the tugs were asking fifteen francs a ton per kilometre instead of ten.

They were also eagerly discussing a barge loaded with stones which had broken away from its moorings and fallen foul of the bridge at Namur and sunk, obstructing one of the arches.

"Any casualties?" asked Maigret.

"The bargee was ashore, but his wife and son were drowned. He was having a drink when they hauled him out of the bar. He ran down to the quay, but it was too late to do anything, as she was already out in the stream. . . ."

Gérard Piedbœuf passed on his way home to lunch. This time he was cycling. A minute or two later, Machère appeared, coming back from the Flemish shop, where he had no doubt broken the news. Turning the corner, he went and rang the Piedbœufs' door bell. The door was opened by the midwife, who received him coldly.

* * * *

"So you've been had up for assaulting girls? . . . Tell me all about it."

On board most barges, the living-quarters are kept in a state of cleanliness rarely equalled in private houses. But that was not the case with the *Etoile Polaire*.

Gustave Cassin was unmarried, and what little domestic work was done, was done by a lad of twenty who was epileptic and not quite all there.

The cabin smelt rather like a barracks. Cassin was busy on a hunk of bread and cold sausage, which he was washing down with a bottle of red wine.

More sober than usual, he looked guardedly at Maigret and was some little time making up his mind to speak.

"It wasn't really an assault at all. I'd already been to bed

with the girl two or three times. . . . One evening I met her on my way and she refused to have anything to do with me, saying that I was drunk. All I did was to catch hold of her wrist, but she yelled out as though I was murdering her. Some *gendarmes* happened to be passing, and as luck would have it I caught one of them on the chin with my fist and bowled him clean over."

"Did you get five years?"

"I thought I was going to. The little bitch swore she'd never had anything to do with me. Fortunately I had some witnesses, though the judge didn't seem to believe all they said, but it helped me out a lot. In fact, I'd have got off with a year if it hadn't been for the *gendarme*, who was in hospital for a fortnight. . . ."

He cut off a bit of bread with his sailor's knife.

"Would you like a drink? . . . We may be off tomorrow. . . . But I want to know more about this lighter that's obstructing the bridge at Namur. . . ."

"And now tell me why you invented that story about the woman standing on the quay."

"What story?" asked Cassin, trying to gain time.

"Come on! Admit that you never saw anything at all."

Maigret did not fail to observe the flicker of glee that came into the bargee's eye.

"Do you think so? Well, perhaps you're right."

"Who asked you to do it?"

"Who asked me?"

The little flame still danced in his eye. He spat out a bit of sausage-skin without even bothering to turn his head.

"Where did you come across Gérard Piedbœuf?"

"Ah, I wonder!"

The two men were as placid the one as the other.

"Did he give you anything?"

"He stood me a few drinks."

Then, suddenly changing his tone, he went on, with a chuckle:

"Only, it isn't true. I was only saying it to please you. . . . And if you'd like me to say the same to a judge and jury, you've only to say the word."

"What did you see, really?"

"If I told you, you wouldn't believe me."

"Go on, all the same."

"All right. . . . I saw a woman waiting. Then a man came and she threw herself into his arms."

"Who were they?"

"How could I tell, in the dark?"

"Where were you?"

"Coming back from a *bistro*."

"Where did the couple go? To the Flemish shop?"

"No, they went behind."

"Behind what?"

"Behind the house. . . . On the other hand, if you'd rather that it wasn't true . . . You see, I know the ropes. There were any amount of lies told at my trial, and my lawyer told more than anyone."

"Do you go sometimes to have a drink in the Flemish shop?"

"Never. They refuse to serve me. All because I brought my fist down once, and they say I broke their scales. They want people to stand there and get drunk without ever moving or saying a word."

"Did Gérard Piedbœuf talk to you?"

"What did I tell you just now?"

"That he'd asked you to say . . ."

"Would you really like to know the truth? . . . Well, here it is, and this time it's God's own truth, and that is, that

I can't stand the sight of a policeman, and you no more than any other. You can repeat that to the magistrate, and I'll swear you beat me up, and what's more, I'll show the marks. . . . Not but what I wouldn't give you a glass of red if you've a mind for one."

Maigret looked hard into his eyes, then suddenly stood up.

"Show me round," he said curtly.

Was he surprised? Was he alarmed? Or merely disagreeable? Whichever it was, Cassin, with his mouth full, made a face.

"What is it you want to see?" he growled.

"Just a moment!"

Maigret went up on deck, returning a moment later with a customs officer whose oilskin shone with rain.

"I've already been cleared by the customs," said Cassin scornfully.

Maigret turned to the officer.

"I suppose all the bargees do a certain amount of smuggling?"

"Except that I wouldn't call it 'a certain amount'!"

"Where do they generally hide the stuff?"

"At one time they had a way of keeping it in watertight cases right under their boats. But nowadays we run a chain under the hull to make sure there's nothing there. . . . Then there's the space between the cabin flooring and the bottom. For that we drill a few holes in the flooring with that huge brace you may have seen on the quay."

"Anywhere else?"

"What's your cargo?" asked the officer.

"Scrap iron," answered Cassin.

"That's awkward. . . ."

Maigret's eyes never left Gustave Cassin, hoping he'd give himself away by an instinctive glance towards a hiding-place.

But the man went on eating ostentatiously, sitting obstinately in his chair.

"Stand up."

The order was obeyed, but with obvious reluctance.

"So I haven't the right to sit down in my own cabin!"

On the chair was a filthy cushion, which Maigret promptly seized. Three sides of it were neatly sewn, but the fourth was done with big clumsy stitches, which betrayed an unpractised hand.

"Thank you, that's all," said Maigret to the customs officer.

"You think there's some contraband here?"

"No. I don't think so after all. Many thanks."

The customs officer regretfully left them. As soon as he was gone, Maigret asked:

"What have we here?"

"Nothing."

"Do you generally keep such hard objects in your cushions?"

He ripped open the seam, disclosing something dark inside. A moment later he was unfolding a small coat, creased and crumpled, made of black serge.

There was no doubt in the inspector's mind that it was the same serge as that of the dress described in the report which Machère had read to him that morning. Like the dress, the coat had no maker's name. Germaine Piedbœuf had made them both herself.

But it wasn't the coat that was the most interesting thing. Unrolling it, Maigret had come to a hammer, whose shaft was smooth with long use.

"The funny thing about it," muttered Cassin, "is that it's going to lead you properly up the garden! . . . I haven't done a thing. Nothing, that is, except pull those two things out of the Meuse on the 4th of January early in the morning."

"And you thought you'd like to keep them to yourself?"

"It's a habit of mine," answered Cassin, with an air of self-satisfaction. "Are you going to arrest me?"

"Is that all you have to say?"

"Yes. Except that you're going to be led right up the garden."

"And you'll soon be sailing?"

"Not if I'm arrested!"

To the man's astonishment, Maigret carefully stuffed the things back in the cushion, slipped it under his overcoat, and went ashore without another word.

Cassin watched the inspector walking along the quay past the customs officer, who saluted respectfully, then he went below again, scratched his head, and poured himself out another drink.

Chapter VII

A JACKET ON THE QUAY

RETURNING to his hotel for lunch, Maigret was told that the postman had brought a registered letter for him, but had refused to leave it in his absence.

That meant he'd have to go to the post office to fetch it. Not a very serious matter. But it was one of a series of incidents that were calculated to try his temper.

During lunch he enquired after Machère. No one had seen him, and a telephone call put through to his hotel elicited the fact that he had left half an hour before. Maigret had, of course, no right whatever to give orders to the local police, but he had wanted, all the same, to give Machère the tip to keep an eye on Gustave Cassin.

At two he was at the post office, where they handed him his letter. A stupid business. Some furniture he had bought, but had then refused to pay for, as they hadn't sent the things he'd ordered. And now the dealer was threatening to sue him.

It took a good half-hour to compose an answer, and then he had to write to his wife about it, telling her just what to do.

Before he had finished he was rung up by the director of the *Police Judiciaire*, who enquired how long he was staying, and asked him a number of questions about some other cases that were in hand.

Out of doors it was still raining. He was sitting in the *salle de café* of his hotel, the floor of which was strewn with sawdust. There was no one else there except the waiter,

who was taking advantage of a quiet moment to do some writing himself.

It was only an absurd little fad, but Maigret loathed writing on marble-topped tables.

"Ring up the *Hôtel de la Gare* again, will you? Ask if the detective's back yet."

Maigret was in a vague state of ill-humour, which was perhaps all the worse for having no serious reason. Two or three times he got up and stared out through the misty window. The sky was a shade brighter, and the rain less heavy, but the quay was still deserted.

About four o'clock, the inspector heard a blast on a steam-whistle. He ran to the door and saw a puff of steam rising from a tug. It was the first sign of any activity since his arrival.

The stream was still running swiftly. The tug shoved off from the quay, and she seemed literally to stagger as the current caught her. She looked so thin and slight, a thoroughbred in comparison to the hulking great barges, and for a moment it looked as though she would be swept headlong down the river. But she held her own, stemmed the tide.

Another blast, longer and more strident. A hauser tautened at her stern, and one of the barges detached itself from the others. The tug was turning now, towing the barge's nose out into the stream. In the barge, two men were leaning with all their weight against the tiller.

At the entrances of other cafés, customers had gathered to watch. Two other barges were under way now, and then the last towing-line tautened and a fourth was dragged out into the stream. By this time, the tug was far down the river, whistling proudly, while her four tenders swept out a half-circle across the river, then lined up behind her as best they could.

The *Etoile Polaire* was not one of them.

* * * *

. . . and I beg you to take the first opportunity of sending for the furniture which was sent in error.

Maigret read through his first letter carefully. Then, taking an envelope, he wrote out the address. He wrote abnormally slowly, as though his fingers were too big for his pen, and he pressed his nib hard down on the paper. The letters themselves were small, but all the lines, upstrokes as well as downstrokes, were fat.

"There's Monsieur Peeters on his motor-bike," said the waiter, who had switched on the lights and was now drawing the curtains.

It was half-past four.

"He must be in love with it to do a hundred and twenty-five miles on a day like this. He's covered with mud from head to foot."

"Albert! . . . Telephone!"—the landlord's wife called out.

Maigret stuck up his envelope and stamped it.

"It's for *Monsieur le commissaire*," said Albert, returning from the telephone. "A call from Paris."

Maigret spoke with the over-gentle voice of a man who's trying not to lose his temper. His wife was at the other end, enquiring when he'd be back.

"And they've been bothering again about that furniture."

"I know. It's all right. I've just been seeing to it."

"Then there's a letter from your opposite number in England. . . ."

"*Oui, ma chérie.* It's not important."

"Is it cold up there? Wrap up well, won't you? I'm sure you haven't got rid of that cold, and . . ."

Why should he be a prey to such impatience? It was so

acute, it was hurting him. Yet it was only a vague impression, an impression something was going on and he was missing it.

"I ought to be back in three or four days."

"Not before?"

"It's hardly likely.... Good-bye. I must be off now...."

Back in the café, he asked where the letter-box was.

"At the corner, at the tobacconist's."

It was nearly dark, and little could be seen of the river except the reflected lights of the other bank. The inspector could just make out a figure leaning against a tree. It at once struck him as odd, for, what with the cold and the rain, it was hardly the weather for loafing about in the open.

He slipped his letters into the box, then turned back. As he did so, the figure detached itself from the tree and followed.

It was done in a trice, Maigret turned swiftly on his heel, took four or five quick strides and had the fellow by the collar.

"What are you doing here?"

The man went red in the face from Maigret's stranglehold.

"Answer, will you?"

There was something disconcerting about the man, something about his evasive eye which made you uncomfortable; and his smile was still worse.

"Aren't you the chap who works aboard the *Etoile Polaire*?"

The other nodded, looking thoroughly pleased at being recognized.

"And you were watching me, weren't you?"

Maigret remembered what he had been told: that the fellow was an epileptic and mentally deficient. On his face was an odd mixture of happiness and fear.

"Don't grin! Tell me what you were doing."

"Watching you."

It was impossible to be severe with the wretch, who was all the more pitiful for being in the years of ripening manhood. Twenty!

He didn't shave, yet it was only a few thin fair hairs that were scattered over his chin. His mouth seemed twice as big as it ought to be.

"Don't hit me. . . ."

"Come along."

Some of the barges had shifted berth. For the first time for weeks there was an air of activity about them. One or two women were coming ashore to do their shopping. Customs officers were going from boat to boat.

The barges that had proceeded that afternoon had left the *Etoile Polaire* lying alone. There was a light in the cabin.

"You go first."

The barge was separated from the quay by several feet of water, and the only way to go on board was over a gangway that consisted of a single and all too flexible plank. In spite of the light in the cabin, there was no one on board.

"Where does your skipper keep his Sunday clothes?"

It wasn't lost on Maigret that the disorder was worse than usual. The lad opened a cupboard and gaped. In a heap at the bottom were Cassin's everyday clothes.

"And his money?"

A vigorous shaking of the head. The half-wit didn't know. Perhaps Cassin took care he didn't.

"All right. You stay here."

Maigret walked off pensively, staring at the ground. Almost bumping into a customs officer, he asked:

"Have you see Cassin of the *Etoile Polaire*?"

"No. Isn't he on board? He's supposed to be sailing first thing tomorrow morning."

"Does the barge belong to him?"

"Good gracious no! But it's in the family. It belongs to a cousin of his who lives at Flémalle, a creature as daft as himself."

"How much money would he be likely to earn?"

"Cassin? Perhaps something like six hundred francs a month. . . . A bit more with the smuggling, but even then not very much."

The house on the frontier was lit up. Not only the shop, but upstairs too.

A minute or two later the shop bell rang, and Madame Peeters could be heard bustling across the kitchen. And Maigret, wiping his feet on the mat, called out:

"It's only me."

* * * *

The only person in the sitting-room was Marguerite Van de Weert, who was turning over the pages of some music.

She looked fluffier than ever in a pale blue satin dress as she gave the visitor a welcoming smile.

"You've come to see Joseph?"

"Isn't he here?"

"He's upstairs, changing. . . . He's mad to come by road in weather like this. And he ought to be looking after himself—he's overworked as it is. . . ."

It wasn't love—it was adoration! You could hear it in her voice. You could tell at once that she was capable of sitting hours at a time gazing at him.

What was there about him that inspired such feelings? And his sisters seemed to share them too.

"Is Anna with him?"

"She'll be hanging his wet clothes up to dry."

"Have you been here long?"

"About an hour."

"You knew Joseph would be coming?"

The faintest cloud passed over her features, but was gone almost as soon as it had come.

"He comes every Saturday. And it's always about this time."

"Is there a telephone in the house?"

"Not here. We have one at home, of course. A doctor can't do without one."

He didn't know why, but Maigret was beginning to dislike her. To be more exact, she was getting on his nerves. She affected rather babyish ways, and her eyes were meant to be so very candid.

"Here he is. He's coming downstairs."

There were steps on the stairs, and a moment later Joseph Peeters came in, clean and tidy, his hair smarmed down, with the comb-marks still showing.

"I didn't know you were here, Inspector."

He wasn't sure whether he ought to shake hands or not, and before he had decided, the moment had slipped by. Turning to Marguerite, he said:

"Have you asked the inspector to have a drink?"

A number of people were speaking Flemish in the shop. Anna came into the room with her usual quiet, self-possessed air, bowing as she had no doubt been taught to bow in some convent school.

"Is it true that there was some trouble last night in the *Café de la Mairie*? We heard something, but you know how people exaggerate. . . . But do sit down.—Joseph, fetch something to drink, will you? . . ."

Maigret was trying to formulate a vague impression that he had had immediately on entering the room. More than once he was on the point of putting his finger on it, but each time he missed it.

Something was changed, but for the life of him he couldn't tell what it was.

The result was to plunge him into one of his sulking moods. His face was shut and forbidding. What he really wanted was to do something eccentric, or even outrageous, just to break the spell.

As for Anna, she was more of a mystery to him than ever. He knew less and less what to think of her. She was wearing the same grey dress she had worn all along, a dress which somehow made her seem imperishable as a statue.

Had external events any hold over her? Whatever happened, she seemed untouched. Her movements were grave, calculated, competent. Her face was serene.

She might have been a character that had stepped out of Greek tragedy, bringing her antique gestures with her, to move about in the humdrum little world of this house astride the frontier.

"Do you ever serve in the shop?"

He used the word *magasin* for shop. He was going to use the humbler word *boutique*, but corrected himself in time.

"Yes, often. Whenever my mother's busy. . . ."

"You serve drinks too?"

She didn't smile. She simply raised her eyebrows.

"Why ever not?"

"I suppose the bargees get drunk sometimes? Do they ever try to take liberties?"

"Never in our place!"

That was just like her. Sure of herself. Firm as a statue.

"Would you like some port, or . . .?"

"If I may, I'd rather have some of the old Schiedam schnapps you gave me yesterday."

"Go and ask *Maman* for a bottle of 'old.'"

Joseph obediently disappeared.

Which made it look as though Maigret had miscalculated in estimating the status of the various members of the family. In his list Joseph had come first, as veritable lord and master of the family. Then Anna. Then Maria. Then Madame Peeters, whose duty it was to mind the shop. Last of all, the old father sleeping in the wicker chair.

But however much they might adore Joseph, it appeared to be Anna, not he, who gave orders.

"Have you discovered anything fresh, Inspector? . . . You saw that the barges were leaving, didn't you? . . . They say the river's open down to Liége, possibly even to Maestricht. In a couple of days we'll have no more than three or four barges here at a time."

Why was she telling him that?

"No, Marguerite! The stemmed wine-glasses. . . ."

Marguerite was taking some small tumblers from the sideboard.

Maigret was still itching to say or do something that would disturb the equilibrium, and now that Joseph was out of the room and Marguerite busy with the glasses, he took the opportunity of showing Anna the photograph of Gérard Piedbœuf.

"I want to speak to you about it," he whispered.

He watched her closely. But if he had expected to disturb her serenity, he was disappointed. She merely made a little sign, a sign of understanding, a sign which meant:

"Yes, yes. But later on. . . ."

And to her brother, who came back into the room, she said:

"Are there still a lot of people in the shop?"

"Five."

Anna was by no means blind to the subtleties of life. The bottle Joseph had brought was fitted with a thin metal spout

which enabled the contents to be poured out quickly without a drop being lost.

Before pouring out the schnapps she removed the appliance, which served much too commercial a purpose to be permitted in the parlour.

Maigret warmed his glass for a moment in the hollow of his hand. Then he raised it to Joseph, who was the only one to drink with him. Joseph raised his glass in turn.

"It's now been proved that Germaine Piedbœuf was murdered."

Marguerite was the only one to make a sound. She uttered a little ladylike scream such as is used on the stage. And then :

"How awful !"

"Machère said something of the sort, but I wasn't going to believe him," said Anna. "I suppose that will make our position still more difficult."

"Or possibly easier. Particularly if I'm able to prove that your brother was not in Givet on the 3rd."

"Why ?"

"Because Germaine Piedbœuf was killed by heavy hammer-blows."

"Good God ! . . . You can't mean it ! . . ."

It was Marguerite who spoke, standing rigid, deathly pale, all ready to faint.

"I've got the hammer in my pocket."

"No, no ! . . . Please ! . . . Don't show it !"

Anna, however, remained calm. Turning to her brother, she said :

"Has your friend returned ?"

"Yesterday."

"It's another student," Anna explained to the inspector, "the one he spent the evening with—the evening of the 3rd.

They were together in a café in Nancy. . . . But ten days ago he was called to Marseilles on account of his mother's death. Now he's back. . . ."

"*A votre santé*," answered Maigret, emptying his glass.

Then he took the bottle and filled it up again. From time to time the shop bell rang, or there would be the sound of sugar being shovelled into a paper bag, or the clink of coins.

"How's your sister?"

"She may be up on Monday or Tuesday, but we're not expecting her here for some little time."

"Is she engaged?"

"Oh no! She wants to be a nun. It's an idea she's been nursing for a long time."

Maigret sensed that something was going on in the shop. The sounds were the same, but the voices a trifle subdued. Had the shop bell rung? He couldn't be sure. But a moment later Madame Peeters was saying in French:

"You'll find them in the sitting-room."

Steps crossed the kitchen, and there was Machère, standing in the doorway, obviously very excited, but making a great effort to keep calm. He looked at the inspector sitting at the table with his glass of schnapps in front of him.

"What is it, Machère?"

"It's . . . Well . . . I'd like to have a word with you. . . ."

"What about?"

"About the . . ."

He broke off, making signs to Maigret that were obvious to everybody.

"Don't be shy."

"It's about the bargee . . . Cassin. . . ."

"He's come back?"

"No . . . He . . ."

"He's confessed to something?"

Machère was on the rack. He had come to discuss a matter which he considered of the utmost importance. A confidential matter too, and he was being made to blurt it out in front of a roomful of people.

"He . . . His cap's been found, and his jacket."

"Which ones? The old or the new?"

"I don't understand."

"Was it his Sunday clothes? Cloth or serge?"

"Dark blue cloth. The jacket was lying on the quay."

Everyone was silent. Anna, who was standing, looked fairly and squarely at the young detective without moving a muscle. Joseph's hands were fidgeting nervously.

"Go on."

"He must have thrown himself into the Meuse. His cap was found in the water. It was carried downstream, but got caught by one of the fenders of the next barge."

"And the jacket?"

"Was lying on the quay with a note pinned to it."

He took the note cautiously from his wallet. A shapeless scrap of paper that had been soaked with rain, the words barely legible.

"*I'm a rotter. The river's the best place for me.*"

Maigret read it out half-audibly. In an anxious voice, Joseph asked:

"I don't understand. What does it mean?"

Marguerite looked from one face to the other, with her big expressionless eyes. Machère was still standing in the doorway. He was ill at ease.

"I think it was you . . ." he began, addressing Maigret, "you who . . ."

Maigret stood up. His sulky look had completely disappeared, giving way to a genial cordiality. When he spoke, his words were addressed chiefly to Anna.

"There you are! . . . I was telling you about a hammer, wasn't I?"

"Please!" Marguerite pleaded.

"What are you doing tomorrow afternoon?"

"The same as any other Sunday. We generally stay at home together. We shall miss Maria. . . ."

"If you allow me, I'd like to call on you. Perhaps you'll be making one of your excellent *tartes au riz*. . . ."

With that, Maigret went out into the passage and put on his overcoat, which the rain had made twice as heavy as usual.

"If you'll excuse me . . ." muttered Machère.

"Yes. You come along with me."

In the shop, Madame Peeters was standing on a little step-ladder, fishing for a packet of starch on one of the highest shelves. A bargee's wife was waiting mournfully at the counter, her shopping-basket hanging from her arm.

Chapter VIII

A VISIT TO THE URSULINES

A SMALL group of people had gathered at the place where the jacket had been found. But Maigret did not stop. Dragging Machère with him, he walked straight on towards the bridge.

"You hadn't said anything to me about the hammer, so I suppose . . ."

"What have you been doing all day?"

Machère looked rather like a guilty schoolboy.

"I went to Namur. . . . I wanted to make sure that Maria Peeters really had sprained her ankle."

"Well?"

"They wouldn't let me in. The nuns looked at me as though I was a savage."

"Did you insist?"

"Indeed I did. I even threatened them."

Maigret suppressed a smile. Going into a garage by the bridge, he asked for a car to take him to Namur. It was thirty miles by the road which ran along the banks of the Meuse.

"Are you coming with me?"

"Do you want me? . . . But I tell you, they won't let you in. Besides, now that we've found the hammer . . ."

"All right. There's another job you could do. Hire a car yourself and go to every little station within a radius of ten or fifteen miles. Make sure Cassin hasn't made off by train."

Maigret drove off. Snuggling well down into the back seat, he smoked serenely, seeing nothing of the landscape but the lights which flicked past intermittently on either hand.

He knew that Maria Peeters was a *régente* in a school kept by the Ursulines. And he knew that the latter held in the teaching world a position comparable with that of the Jesuits, with whom they formed, so to speak, the aristocracy of Catholic education. Their school in Namur would doubtless be frequented by all the swagger families of the Province.

And Maigret was decidedly tickled by the thought of young Machère trying to force his way in, and even resorting to threats.

"I forgot to ask him what he'd called them," thought Maigret with a chuckle. "Probably *mesdames*. . . . Or perhaps *ma bonne sœur*. . . ."

Maigret was tall, broad-shouldered, massive and heavy-featured, but when he rang the convent bell in a little street where grass grew between the cobble-stones, the lay sister who opened the door was not in the least alarmed.

"Might I speak to the Reverend Mother?"

"She's in the chapel. But as soon as Benediction is over . . ."

And he was shown into a waiting-room, in comparison with which the Peeters' sitting-room was all dirt and squalor. Here, looking at the floor was little short of looking in a mirror. But what was more impressive even than the cleanliness was the feeling that every object had stood in the same place from time immemorial, that the clock on the mantelpiece had never stopped, nor ever been a minute fast or slow.

From the sumptuously tiled corridors came the sound of gliding footfalls and occasional whispers, and from further off the faint sound of an organ.

The people of the Quai des Orfèvres would doubtless have been astonished to see their Maigret very much at ease. When the Mother Superior arrived he bowed with due discretion, and when he began speaking he addressed her in the proper fashion:

"*Ma mère . . .*"

She waited, her clasped hands hidden within her voluminous sleeves.

"I must apologize for troubling you, but I would like your permission to visit one of your teachers. Of course I know it's against the rules, but since the life of somebody is at stake—or at any rate the liberty—I thought perhaps . . ."

"Are you from the police too?"

"Yes. I believe you've already had a visit from a detective."

"A gentleman who said he belonged to the police. He made rather a disturbance, and went off shouting that we'd hear more about it before long."

Maigret apologized for the incident. He spoke quietly, politely, deferentially, and after a few well-chosen phrases a lay sister was sent to warn Maria Peeters that she would be receiving a visitor.

"I believe you think very highly of her, *ma mère*?"

"Very highly indeed. We hesitated to take her at first on account of her parents' business. It wasn't their being shopkeepers, but the fact that they served drinks. In the end we waived the objection, and we've never regretted it for a moment. . . . Recently she arrived limping, having sprained her ankle getting out of the train, and we put her to bed. . . . She's very upset about it, as she hates giving trouble to others. . . ."

The lay sister returned. Maigret followed her along interminable corridors. On the way, he passed several

groups of pupils, all of them dressed alike: pleated black smocks, a blue silk ribbon round the neck.

At last they came to a door on the second floor, and the lay sister, having opened it, asked whether she should stay or not.

"Perhaps you'd better leave us, *ma sœur*."

A little room of austere simplicity, the walls painted with oil-paint and hung with religious lithographs in black frames, and a large crucifix.

An iron bedstead. A thin figure hardly perceptible beneath the bed-clothes.

No face was visible, nor did the invalid speak. The door was shut behind him, and Maigret stood waiting, looking distinctly out of place in his thick wet overcoat and his bowler in his hand.

At last he heard a stifled sob. But Maria Peeters still kept her face turned to the wall and covered as much as possible by the bed-clothes.

"Calm yourself," he murmured. "Your sister, Anna, must have told you to look on me as a friend."

But, far from calming her, he seemed only to make her worse. Her whole body was shaken by sobs.

"What does the doctor say about it? . . . Will you be laid up for long?"

It's embarrassing to have to talk to an invisible person. Still more if it's a person you've never even seen.

But the sobbing gradually subsided. Maria was making an effort to get herself under control. She sniffed, and her hand groped for a handkerchief under the pillow.

"What is it that's upsetting you? . . . The Reverend Mother has been telling me how much they appreciate you here."

"Leave me alone," she pleaded.

At the same moment there was a knock on the door, and

the Mother Superior entered as though she had sensed that it was the right moment to intervene.

"I hope you don't mind, but I know how sensitive poor Maria is."

"Has she always been like that?"

"She has a rather delicate nature. . . . And as soon as she realized she would be laid up for some days, and that someone else would have to take her classes, she had a bad attack of nerves. . . . Let us see your face, Maria."

A vigorous head-shaking from the girl in bed.

"Of course we know all about the trouble in the family, and the cruel things that are being said. I've had three masses said for the truth to come to light. And I've just been praying for you at Benediction, Maria."

At last the latter showed her face. A miserable little face, all pinched and pale, except for the red blotches that came from crying.

She was not in the least like Anna. She had her mother's delicacy of line, only her features were so irregular that she could not possibly have passed for pretty. The nose was too long, too pointed, the mouth long and thin.

"I'm sorry," she said, dabbing her eyes with her handkerchief. "I'm too easily upset, I know. But the thought of being in bed here while others . . . You're Inspector Maigret, I suppose? . . . Have you seen my brother?"

"I left him a little more than an hour ago. He was at home with Anna and your cousin Marguerite."

"How is he?"

"He's all right. He seems quite confident."

Was she going to start crying again? The Reverend Mother looked encouragingly at Maigret. She liked the calm authority with which he spoke, and felt it was bound to reassure the patient.

"Anna told me you were thinking of taking the veil. . . ."

The tears flowed afresh. Maria had no thought for her looks, and did not attempt to hide her shiny blotchy face.

"We've been expecting it for a long time," said the Mother Superior. "Maria belongs to us much more than to the world."

The thought of it threw Maria into another fit of sobbing. Her chest heaved, her legs twitched, and she clutched the bed-clothes convulsively.

"You see how right we were to refuse to let the other gentleman see her."

Maigret was still standing in the middle of the room, looking positively enormous in his heavy overcoat. He looked at the little bed, and the wretched sobbing girl.

"Has a doctor been?"

"Yes. He says the sprain's nothing. The real trouble is the nervous disturbance it has given rise to. . . . Perhaps we'd better leave her now—that is, if you've finished. . . . Come, now! Calm yourself, Maria. I'll send Mère Julienne in to stay by you for a bit."

The image he took away with him was that of a white bed, hair sprawling over the pillow, and an eye fixed on him as he backed out of the room.

In the corridor the Mother Superior spoke in subdued tones as she glided along the polished floor.

"She's never been very strong, and this unhappy scandal has thoroughly unnerved her. Her fall itself was no doubt due to nerves. . . . She's ashamed of the trouble her brother's got into, and more than once she's said that of course we couldn't receive her into our Order now. She's had terrible moods of despondency, gazing at the ceiling for hours at a time and refusing to take her food. . . . Then suddenly it'll

take her the other way, and she'll be shaken to pieces by sobs. . . . She's been given injections. . . ."

They had reached the ground floor.

"Would you mind if I asked you what you thought about the case, Inspector?"

"Not at all. But I should be very much at a loss for an answer. . . . Honestly, I don't know what to think. . . . Tomorrow, perhaps . . ."

"Tomorrow?"

"And now I have only to thank you, and to apologize for having troubled you, *ma mère*. I might perhaps take the liberty of telephoning to ask after the patient."

At last he was outside, breathing the chill air, saturated with moisture. He found his car drawn up by the kerb.

"Back to Givet."

Once more he nestled down into the upholstery of the car and blissfully filled his pipe. At some cross-roads near Dinant he caught sight of a sign-post!

Grottes de Rochefort. . . .

It flashed past too quickly for him to read the number of kilometres, but he caught a glimpse of a road that led away into the darkness. It set him thinking, thinking of a fine Sunday, a train packed with trippers, two couples: Joseph Peeters and Germaine Piedbœuf—then Anna and Gérard.

A hot sunny day. And no doubt the trippers, on their homeward journey, carried armfuls of flowers.

Anna, sitting in the train, battered yet thrilled by what had happened, furtively eyeing the man who had changed the meaning of her life.

And Gérard, thoroughly pleased with himself, talking and showing off, with no thought of the gravity of what was for him merely a lark.

Was it broken off then and there? Or did either try to renew it?

"No," answered Maigret to himself. "Anna must have understood. Before nightfall she must have had no illusions left, and from that day she must have avoided him."

And he pictured her guarding her secret, fearing for months the possible sequel to that afternoon, hating Gérard, stiffening, holding up her head, and setting her face against all romance.

"Shall I take you to your hotel?"

They were at Givet already. The Belgian frontier with its khaki-clad customs officer, then the French frontier, the quay, the barges.

Maigret was quite surprised to feel the heavy object he had in his overcoat pocket. He had forgotten all about it.

Machère had heard the car arrive, and when Maigret had paid off the driver, he found the young detective standing at the entrance of the *Café de la Meuse*.

"Did they let you in?"

"Of course."

"Not really? I felt sure they wouldn't. As a matter of fact, I thought they had a very good reason. I thought she wasn't there at all."

"Where else would she be?"

"I don't know. It's getting beyond me. Particularly since that hammer was discovered. . . . Do you know who's been to see me?"

"Gustave Cassin?"

They were in the café now, and Maigret, choosing a corner seat near the window, ordered a *demi*.

"Not Cassin. . . . That is, not quite. But it comes to much the same thing. I'd been round to all the stations without any result. Then Gérard Piedbœuf came to look me up."

"To tell you where the man was hiding?"

"To say that Cassin had been seen getting into the 4.15 at the station here in Givet. It's the Brussels train."

"Who saw him?"

"A friend of Gérard's. He said he'd bring him along if I wanted to see him."

"Dinner for two?" asked the landlord.

"No. . . . Yes. . . . Just as you like. . . ."

Maigret took a long, greedy draught of beer, then asked:

"Is that all?"

"I should have thought it was quite enough! . . . If he was really seen at the station, it means he isn't dead. And what's more, it means he's running away. . . . If that's the case . . ."

"Naturally."

"You think the same as I do?"

"I don't think anything at all, Machère. I'm hot one moment and cold the next. In other words, I think I'm in for a real streaming cold. In fact, I think bed's the best place for me. . . . Waiter! Another *demi*! No. Make it a hot grog. With plenty of rum. . . ."

"Has she really sprained her ankle?"

Maigret didn't answer. He had suddenly fallen into a sombre mood. He even looked anxious.

"I suppose the examining magistrate has given you a blank warrant?"

"Yes, but he told me to be very careful how I used it. It's so easy to stir up trouble in a little town. If possible, he wants me to ring him up before taking any drastic steps."

"And what are you thinking of doing?"

"I've already wired to the *Sûreté* at Brussels to ask them to arrest Cassin as he steps off the train. I must ask you to give me the hammer."

To his neighbours' astonishment, the inspector produced a hammer from his pocket and laid it on the marble table.

"Is that all you want?"

"You'll have to make a statement, since it's you who found it."

"Oh no! No need to say it's me. Officially, you found it yourself."

Machère's eyes shone with joy.

"Thanks. That's very good of you. Things like that count for promotion."

"I've laid two places near the stove," said the landlord.

"Thank you. But I'm going to bed. I couldn't face a meal."

And Maigret shook his companion by the hand, and went up to his room.

He had had a cold hanging about him for days, and trudging about in wet clothes had certainly made it no better. He went to bed feeling worn out. For half an hour he tossed about, with unformed images playing havoc with his mind, but finally he went off into a heavy sleep.

The next morning, however, he was little the worse for wear. No one else was up when he came down, except the waiter, whom he found in the café lighting the percolator, then putting ground coffee into the upper part.

The town was still sleeping. Darkness was only now giving place to daylight, and the lights were still burning. The only sign of life outside was on the river. Voices could be heard calling from barge to barge. Towing-lines were passed through fairways and turned up round bollards. A tug slowly approached, taking up station at the head of the line. Another convoy was off to Belgium and Holland.

It wasn't actually raining, but the finest of drizzles was enough to wet your shoulders as you walked through it.

Some church bells started ringing. A light went on in one of the windows of the Flemish shop. Then the door opened,

to be carefully closed again by Madame Peeters, who then hurried off with a cloth-bound missal in her hand.

As soon as she returned, she opened up the shop, then went and lit the kitchen fire.

It was nine o'clock before Joseph appeared on the doorstep —and even then he was unshaven, uncombed, and without a collar.

At ten he reappeared in hat and coat and went to church with Anna. The latter wore a new coat of beige cloth.

Maigret was out all the morning, wandering about, except when he went from time to time into a café to warm himself with a glass of spirits. The people who knew were saying it was going to freeze, which would be a catastrophe for the flooded regions.

At the *Café de la Mairie* were a number of bargees waiting for news of a tug which was expected at any moment. They were waiting to know whether the skipper would be prepared to sail again the same day with the barges that were in a hurry to be off. Now and again one of them would rise from his seat and go out to stare downstream.

It was almost twelve when Gérard Piedbœuf left home, in his Sunday best: brown shoes, a light grey hat, gloves. Passing close to Maigret, his first idea was to ignore him.

But he couldn't. He was itching to get his own back.

"I hope I'm not in your way," he sneered. "Of course I know you can't stand the sight of me. . . ."

His eyes were sunken. Since the little row in the *Café de la Mairie* his nerves had been perpetually on the stretch.

Maigret shrugged his shoulders and turned his back. He watched the midwife put the child in a pram and wheel it off towards the centre of the town.

No sign of Machère. It wasn't till one o'clock that Maigret came across him. It was in the *Café de la Mairie*, and Gérard

was there too, with the same people he had been with on Friday night.

Machère was at a table with three other men, and Maigret had the feeling he had seen them before. He was duly introduced.

One was the deputy mayor, and one of the other two his secretary. All of them were in their best clothes and were drinking some kind of aniseed *apéritif*. It was by no means their first: in fact, there was a pile of three saucers at each place. Machère's self-assurance was a trifle exaggerated.

"I was just telling these gentlemen that the case is practically finished. . . . It's up to the Belgian police now. . . . I'm surprised there's been no telegram yet to say he's been arrested in Brussels."

"Telegrams aren't delivered on Sunday after eleven. That is, unless you go to the post office and fetch them yourself. . . . What will you have, Inspector? . . . Do you know, people have been talking a lot about you in the town? . . ."

"Very nice of them!"

"No, I'm afraid they haven't been saying anything very nice about you. Your attitude has been interpreted as . . ."

"*Garçon! Un demi!*" called out Maigret. "And mind it's cold."

"You drink beer at this time of the day? . . ."

Marguerite passed along the street, and you could see from her walk that she was quite conscious of her reputation of being the best-dressed young lady in the town.

"They're a nuisance, these family scandals. . . . We haven't had a case of this kind in Givet for ten years. The last was a Polish workman who . . ."

"Excuse me, gentlemen. . . ."

Maigret dashed out into the street, just in time to catch Anna Peeters and her brother, who walked along with their

heads high, as though to defy all the suspicion and animosity directed against them.

"Is it all right for me to come this afternoon, as I suggested yesterday?"

"Of course. At what time?"

"About half-past three, if that suits you."

With a sulky look on his face, he returned to his hotel, chose the most isolated table, and sat down to lunch.

"Put a call through to Paris, will you?"

"The telephone doesn't work after eleven on Sundays."

"All right. Never mind."

During the meal he scanned a little local paper. One of the headlines amused him!

The Givet Mystery Thickens.

If it had thickened for him, it had solidified altogether! In fact, there was no longer any mystery at all.

"Give me some more of those French beans," he called out to the waiter.

Chapter IX

ROUND THE WICKER CHAIR

Of all the little family rites that distinguished a Sunday in the Peeters' household, what most struck Maigret was the shifting of the wicker arm-chair.

During the week its place, and therefore the old man's, was by the kitchen stove. Even when visitors were received in the sitting-room, it made no difference.

But on Sundays, ritual demanded the old man's inclusion, and a place was set aside for the wicker chair by the window looking out on to the yard. The meerschaum pipe with the long wild-cherry stem lay on the window-sill by a jar of tobacco.

In a small leather-upholstered easy-chair Dr. Van de Weert sat with his legs crossed, facing the stove. He was reading the report of the Belgian pathologist, and as he read he nodded, shook his head, raised his eyebrows, or otherwise expressed whatever thoughts went through his mind.

Finally he handed the document back to Maigret. Marguerite, who was between them, wanted to take it, but her father objected:

"No, my dear. It's not for you."

Maigret handed it to Joseph Peeters.

"I dare say you'll be interested . . ."

They were sitting round the table: Joseph and Marguerite, Anna and her mother, the latter getting up every few minutes to see to the coffee. Like a true Belgian, the doctor was drinking Burgundy with his cigar, whose lighted end he waved constantly from side to side beneath his chin.

As he passed through the kitchen, Maigret had seen half a dozen tarts all ready.

"It's certainly a very thorough report," said the doctor, "though it doesn't say whether . . . whether . . ."

He glanced at his daughter with embarrassment.

"Whether she was raped," said Maigret bluntly.

And he nearly laughed aloud at the shocked expression on the little man's face. Not that he wasn't quite prepared to discuss the subject, but it had to be done in a suitably round-about way.

"It would have been interesting to know," he went on. "For in cases such as these . . . there was one in 1911, for instance . . ."

And in duly veiled phraseology he described a very uninteresting case, to which Maigret did not bother to listen. Instead, he watched Joseph reading the pathologist's report.

It wasn't pretty reading either. A minute description of Germaine Piedbœuf's body in the state in which it had been found after long immersion in the water.

Joseph was pale. Like his sister Maria, he had rather pinched nostrils.

Would he stick it? Or would he give it a cursory glance and hand it back?

There was no doubt about the answer. He was reading it carefully line by line, and Anna, leaning over his shoulder, was reading too. He was about to turn over the page, when she stopped him.

"Just a moment."

She had still three lines to read. Then together they began the following page, which started with:

The hole in the cranium is of considerable dimensions, and no vestige of brain can be found within, it having been either washed out or eaten by fish.

"If you wouldn't mind taking your glass, *Monsieur le commissaire*, so that I can lay the table. . . ."

Madame Peeters removed the ash-tray, the box of cigars, and the decanter of schnapps, leaving them on the mantelpiece while she spread a hand-embroidered cloth over the table.

Anna and Joseph were still reading, while Marguerite eyed them enviously. The doctor, realizing that nobody was listening, returned to his cigar.

By the end of the second page, Joseph was white as a sheet, with dark shadows on either side of his nose, and beads of perspiration on his forehead. He had had enough, and it was Anna who turned over the page, and she alone who read to the end.

Marguerite left her seat and touched the young man on the shoulder.

"Poor dear! You shouldn't have read it. . . . Why don't you go outside for a breath of fresh air?"

Maigret pounced on the suggestion.

"That's a good idea. And I'd like to stretch my legs too."

A moment later they were both standing bare-headed on the quay. The rain had stopped. There was no space between the barges that was not exploited by some fishing enthusiast. A continuous electric bell, sounding somewhere beyond the bridge, signalled the opening of a cinema.

Joseph nervously lit a cigarette, then gazed out over the river.

"It's upset you, hasn't it? . . . Excuse my asking, but are you still thinking of marrying Marguerite?"

A long silence followed. Joseph avoided turning towards Maigret, who looked steadily at his profile. At last the young man turned his head, but it was towards the shop, then towards the bridge, and lastly back to the Meuse.

"I don't know."

"Have you ever been in love with her?"

"Why did you make me read that report?"

He passed his hand across his forehead, and in spite of the cold air his fingers were wet from the contact.

"Was Germaine much less pretty?"

"Oh, stop! . . . I don't know. . . . I've had it dinned into me all my life that Marguerite was beautiful, and intelligent, and cultured, and everything else. . . ."

"And now?"

"I don't know."

He didn't want to talk about it. The few words he spoke seemed to be dragged out of him against his will. He squeezed his cigarette so tight between his fingers that he tore the paper.

"She's prepared to go through with it, in spite of your son?"

"She wants to adopt it."

His features sagged. He looked ill with lassitude, or perhaps disgust. He shot a glance at Maigret to see if any more questions were coming.

"In your family everybody seems to think you'll be married soon. . . . Is Marguerite your mistress?"

The answer was a low growl:

"No."

"She wouldn't have it?"

"There was never any question of it. . . . I never dreamt of such a thing. . . . You don't understand."

And in sudden outburst:

"I've got to marry her. I've *got* to. And that's all about it."

The two men stared in front of them. Maigret began to feel cold without an overcoat. At that moment the shop door opened, and he once more heard the bell he knew so well. Then Marguerite's voice, too sweet, too caressing:

"What are you doing, Joseph?"

The young man's eyes met Maigret's for a second, and the look in them said yet more clearly:

"I've got to, and that's all about it."

And Marguerite went on:

"You'll catch cold if you stand out there much longer. Besides, the coffee's ready. . . . What's the matter? You're still as pale as a ghost. . . ."

Joseph turned towards the house, but not without a fleeting, wistful look towards the corner of the little street in which, invisible from where they stood, was the humble house where Germaine had lived.

Anna was already cutting the tarts into lavish slices.

* * * *

Madame Peeters said little, as though conscious of the superiority of her children. But as soon as one of them spoke she smiled and nodded her approval.

All the same, she seemed to have made up her mind to say her little piece on this occasion.

"If you'll excuse me, *Monsieur le commissaire* . . . I hope I'm not going to say anything stupid. . . ."

To help herself out, she put another large slice of tart on the inspector's plate.

"I heard that certain things were found on board the *Etoile Polaire*, and also that Cassin had run away. . . . He's been here several times, but in the end I had to turn him away. First of all because he was always asking for credit, and then because he was never sober. . . . But that's not what I wanted to talk to you about. . . . The thing is, that if he's run away he must be guilty. And if he's guilty, that settles everything, doesn't it?"

Anna was placidly eating. She didn't look at Maigret or show any interest in her mother's theories. Marguerite was trying to coax Joseph to eat something.

"A small piece. . . . Just to please me. . . ."

With his mouth full, Maigret replied to Madame Peeters:

"I could answer your question if I was in charge of the case. But I'm not. . . . Don't forget: it was your daughter who asked me to come here to clear the family of suspicion."

Van de Weert fidgeted on his chair like a man who's dying to speak but can't get a word in.

"But really . . ." he began.

"Machère's in charge here, and . . ."

"But really, Inspector, there's such a thing as rank," said the doctor at last. "I don't know much about the police, but you must be a great deal higher up than he is."

"When I'm acting officially. But here I've no status at all. If I want to ask questions, people can refuse to answer. If I want to enter a house, they can refuse me admittance. . . . I went on board the *Etoile Polaire* at the risk of being turned away. By a stroke of luck I found the hammer Germaine was killed with, and the little coat she had been wearing. . . ."

"In that case . . ."

"In that case nothing! They're trying to arrest the man. Perhaps they've already done so by this time. Only, he may have quite a lot to say for himself. For instance, he might say that he picked the things up and kept them without realizing their importance. . . . Or he might say he was afraid to come forward. Having had a previous conviction, he thought nobody would believe him. . . ."

"That won't hold water."

"There's many a defence that won't hold water. But there's many a prosecution that's in exactly the same plight. . . . And as for prosecuting, there are others who might be accused. . . . Do you know what I was told today? . . . That Gérard Piedbœuf is in the devil of a mess and doesn't know

how to get out of it. He's up to his ears in debt. Worse still, he was found pinching money from the till. They were ready to overlook it, but they're withholding half his pay till it's all paid back."

"Really?"

"So why shouldn't he have got rid of his sister to claim damages from you?"

"What a dreadful idea!" exclaimed Madame Peeters, who was so horrified as to be unable to go on eating.

"You knew him pretty well, didn't you?" said Maigret, turning to Joseph.

"I saw a certain amount of him at one time. But it's a long time ago."

"Before the child was born, wasn't it? . . . You used to go on outings together, if I'm not mistaken. In fact, I think your sister went with you once, when you went to the Rochefort Caves. . . ."

"Did you really?" asked Madame Peeters, turning to Anna. "I never heard about that."

"If I did, I've forgotten all about it," said Anna, whose eyes were fixed on the inspector as she went on eating.

"Still, all that's of no importance," said Maigret. "As a matter of fact, I'm not sure what I wanted to say. . . . Anyhow, I'd like another piece of tart, Mademoiselle Anna. No, not the fruit one. I'll stick to your magnificent *tarte au riz*. You made it, I suppose?"

"She always does," Madame Peeters made haste to answer.

And suddenly a dead silence reigned in the room. Maigret said no more, and nobody else was disposed to undertake the burden of conversation. Nothing but the sound of munching all round the table. The inspector dropped his fork, and quickly stooping to pick it up, he caught sight of Marguerite's elegantly shod foot pressing on Joseph's.

"Machère seems to be a capable fellow," he said at last.

"He doesn't look very intelligent," said Anna slowly and deliberately.

And Maigret smiled at her. It was a smile of complicity.

"How many people do look intelligent? And when it comes to that, it's often just as well not to. As a rule, as soon as I've found a likely suspect, I take care to look as foolish as I can."

It was the first time Maigret had spoken to them like that. He seemed almost to be taking them into his confidence.

"But one can't really change one's features," said the doctor. "Take your forehead, for instance. To anyone with the least smattering of phrenology. . . . Well, I wouldn't mind betting you're very headstrong."

The meal came to an end at last. The inspector was the first to push back his chair and cross his legs. He took his pipe from his pocket and started filling it.

"Do you know what I'd like you to do, Mademoiselle Marguerite? Go to the piano and give us the *Song of Solveig*."

She hesitated and looked enquiringly at Joseph, while Madame Peeters murmured:

"She plays so well. . . . And such a voice!"

"There's one thing I regret, and that's that Mademoiselle Maria isn't with us. . . . And my last day too. . . ."

Anna looked sharply at him.

"Are you going?"

"This evening. . . . I have to work for my living, you know. Besides, my wife's getting impatient."

"And Monsieur Machère?"

"I don't know what he intends doing. But I suppose . . ."

The shop bell rang. There were hurried steps and then a knock on the door.

It was Machère in a state of great excitement.

"Is the inspector here?"

He hadn't seen him at once, taken aback as he was to find himself barging in on a family party.

"What is it?"

"I'd like a word with you."

"Excuse me, will you?"

And Maigret led the way into the shop, where he stood leaning on the counter.

"Those people make me sick."

Machère irritably jerked his chin in the direction of the sitting-room.

"The smell of their coffee and tarts is enough to turn me up, to start with."

"Is that what you came to tell me?"

"No. I've heard from Brussels. The train came in punctually . . ."

"But our bargee wasn't there!"

"You knew it already?"

"No, but I'm not surprised. Did you take the man for a fool? I certainly didn't. He must have got out at some little junction, taken another train, and then still another. . . . This evening he may be in Germany, or in Amsterdam, or he may even have doubled back to Paris."

"And where's he going to get the money from?" asked Machère sarcastically.

"What do you mean?"

"That I've been making enquiries. Yesterday Cassin couldn't pay for what was down on the slate in the *bistro*, so they refused to give him any more drinks. . . . And it's worse than that. It seems he owes money all round, and the tradesmen wanted to stop him sailing."

Maigret looked at his companion with an air of complete indifference.

"What else?"

"I didn't stop at that. And it's been the hell of a sweat on a Sunday, with half the people out. I even had to go to the cinema to question one or two."

While he smoked his pipe, Maigret amused himself putting weights in the two scale-pans to see if he could obtain a perfect balance.

"I found out that yesterday Gérard Piedbœuf borrowed two thousand francs. He got his father to sign an I.O.U., as no one would trust him that far."

"Did they meet?"

"Exactly! They did. It was a customs officer who saw Gérard Piedbœuf walking along the quay with Cassin, near the Belgian Customs House."

"At what time?"

"About two."

"Excellent!"

"What's excellent about it? If Gérard gave him the money, it was to . . ."

"Steady now! Don't jump to conclusions, Machère. It's a very risky business."

"The fact remains that Cassin, who hadn't a bean in the morning, could buy a railway ticket in the afternoon. I've been to the station. He paid for the ticket with a thousand-franc note. And it seems he had others."

"Others or *one* other?"

"I think he said others, though I'm not quite sure. . . . But tell me, what would you do in my place?"

"Me?"

"Yes."

Maigret sighed, knocked his pipe out against his heel, and pointed to the sitting-room.

"I'd go in and have a nice glass of schnapps. . . . Particularly as there's some music to go with it."

"Is that all you . . . ?"

"Come on! . . . You're not going to tell me you've anything else to do! . . . Where's Gérard Piedbœuf?"

"At the *Scala*. That's the cinema. With one of the factory-girls."

"I bet they're sitting in the best seats."

And Maigret, with a quiet chuckle, pushed the young detective into the sitting-room, where the light was failing sufficiently to blur all the outlines. A thin wisp of smoke rose straight up from the doctor's chair. Madame Peeters was taking the tea-things into the kitchen to wash up. At the piano, Marguerite was letting her fingers run casually over the notes.

"Do you really want me to play?"

"I do indeed. . . . Sit down, Machère."

Joseph was standing by the fire, with his right elbow on the mantelpiece, staring through the window into the bleak grey light outside.

"*L'hiver peut s'enfuir,*
Le printemps bien-aimé
Peut s'écouler. . . .
Les feuilles d'automne
Et les fruits d'été
Tout peut passer . . ."

The voice lacked firmness. Marguerite had to make an effort to go on to the end. Twice she struck a false note.

"*Mais tu me reviendras,*
Ô mon beau fiancé,
Pour ne plus me quitter. . . ."

Anna was not in the room. Nor was she in the kitchen, where Madame Peeters could be heard creeping about, making as little noise as possible in deference to the music.

"*Je t'ai donné mon cœur. . . .*"

From the piano, Marguerite could not see Joseph's dejected figure. He had let his cigarette go out.

The room was darkening rapidly. The red-hot fire in the stove threw a purple glare on to the polished table-legs.

To Machère's amazement, Maigret slowly edged towards the door and slipped out, apparently unnoticed by the others. The young detective would have liked to know what he was up to, but he didn't like to interfere.

Maigret went upstairs without making a sound, to find himself on the landing facing two closed doors. It was almost quite dark here, but he could clearly see the two pale splodges which were the white china handles.

He paused for a moment, then put his pipe in his pocket, burning as it was, turned one of the handles, went in, and shut the door behind him.

Anna was there. The room was darker than the one downstairs. It seemed to be filled with a fine grey dust which lay thicker on the air in some places than in others, particularly in the corners.

Anna did not move. Hadn't she heard him enter ?

She was looking out of the window across the darkening river. On the other bank lights had been lit which shot their pointed rays into the twilight.

From behind, Anna looked as though she was crying. She was tall. She seemed more powerful in build and more statuesque than ever.

Her grey dress melted in the grey light and made her part and parcel of her surroundings.

When he was only a step from her, one of the floor-boards creaked, but still she did not move.

And then he put his hand on her shoulder, with quite surprising gentleness. At the same time he sighed like a man who no longer has to keep up appearances and can at last relax.

"Well! Here we are!"

She turned slowly round. She was perfectly calm. There wasn't a line which broke the severe harmony of her features.

Only the neck seemed slowly to swell a little as though from some mysterious inner pressure.

Every note of the music could be heard, and even the words of the *Song of Solveig*.

"*Que Dieu veuille encore*
Dans sa grande bonté
Te protéger. . . ."

Anna's pale blue eyes looked into Maigret's. A little pout heralded a sob, but it was quickly suppressed, and the line of the mouth fell back into the same quiet, statue-like repose as the rest of her.

Chapter X

THE *SONG OF SOLVEIG*

"WHAT are you doing up here?"

Strangely enough, Anna's tone wasn't aggressive. She looked sadly at him, and perhaps beneath the unruffled surface was fear. But no hatred.

"You heard what I said just now, didn't you? I'm leaving tonight. During these last few days we've been thrown into pretty close contact, you and I . . ."

He looked round him. At the big bed where the two girls slept, at the white bearskin mat, at the wallpaper covered with little pink flowers, at the wardrobe whose mirror no longer reflected anything but dusk and shadows.

". . . . and I didn't want to go till I'd had it out with you."

The window was a like a grey screen on which Anna's silhouette grew darker and vaguer as the minutes went by. And all at once Maigret noticed a detail he had never noticed before. An hour earlier he couldn't have told you how she did her hair. Now he knew. In long close plaits which were rolled up in a large bun on her neck.

"Anna!" called Madame Peeters from the bottom of the stairs.

The music had stopped. Anna's and Maigret's absence had at last attracted attention.

"Yes. . . . I'm up here."

"Have you seen the inspector?"

"Yes. . . . We're coming. . . ."

To answer, she had moved over to the door. She closed it

again, then came back towards Maigret, looking very grave, gazing at him with extraordinary intensity.

"What did you want to see me about?"

"You know as well as I do."

She didn't look away. She simply stood there, looking at him intently, with her hands clasped in front of her in an attitude that belongs to old women.

"What are you going to do?"

"I've already told you. I'm going back to Paris."

Then at last her voice quivered as she asked:

"And what about me?"

It was the first time she had betrayed her feelings. She was conscious of it herself, and it was no doubt to tide her over the moment that she walked over to the door again and switched on the light.

The lamp had a yellow silk shade which threw the light down into a small circle on the floor.

"First of all I must ask you a question," said Maigret. "Who put up the money? You had to act quickly and quietly, and I don't suppose you keep very much on the premises."

Maigret spoke slowly. The silence round them was absolute.

He paused, and once more looked about him, sensing all the atmosphere of this *petit bourgeois* house. At that moment it even seemed to him that he knew all that was going on downstairs. Dr. Van de Weert stretching his short legs out towards the stove; Joseph and Marguerite silently eyeing each other; Machère fidgeting irritably, longing to know what Maigret was doing; Madame Peeters picking up her knitting or filling up Machère's glass as she murmured politenesses.

And each time he glanced at her, the inspector found Anna's pale blue eyes fixed steadfastly upon him.

"It was Marguerite," she said at last.
"She has money of her own?"
"Yes. She was left some by her mother."
"She keeps it at home?"
"A few thousand francs, and a lot more in bearer bonds."
And Anna asked once more:
"What are you going to do?"

As she said it, tears came into her eyes. But they disappeared so quickly that Maigret almost thought he'd been mistaken.

"And you?"

Why were they fencing like that? Why didn't they come straight to the point? Was each afraid of the other?

"How did you manage to bring Germaine Piedbœuf up to your room? . . . Wait a moment. . . . She came to the shop to ask news of Joseph and to fetch her monthly allowance. Your mother saw her first. Then you went into the shop. . . . Did you know then you were going to kill her?"

"Yes."

There was no feeling betrayed now, not even a little undercurrent of fear. The voice was clear and matter-of-fact.

"How long had you known?"

"About a month."

Maigret sat down on the big bed in which Anna and Maria slept. He passed a hand across his forehead, and studied the wallpaper which served as background to his adversary.

For there was no doubt about it: she was proud of what she had done. She took full responsibility. She almost vaunted its premeditation.

"So you love your brother as much as all that?"

But he knew it already. And it wasn't only the case with Anna. There were three women—no, four, with Madame Peeters—who adored the ground he trod on.

He wasn't good-looking. If you came to look critically at them, his features were all over the shop. A long weedy figure, with a disproportionately long nose. Eyes that spoke volumes of boredom.

And yet, if he wasn't a god, he was the most beloved of mortals to his womenfolk, who would put their heads together in the parlour of the Flemish shop and extol his virtues.

"I was determined he shouldn't kill himself."

For a second, Maigret was on the point of losing his temper. He jumped up from the bed and started pacing up and down the room.

"Did he threaten to?"

"If he had married Germaine, he would have killed himself the same day. I know he would."

Maigret didn't know whether to laugh or swear. In the end he merely shrugged his shoulders. He thought of the talks he had had with Joseph. Joseph, not knowing which of the two girls he loved. Joseph, scared stiff by the thought of marrying either.

Yet to play up to his sisters, he tried feebly to play the part they'd given him.

"His life would have been ruined."

Of course it would! That is, if you looked at things from the standpoint of the *Song of Solvieg*.

Mais tu me reviendras,
Ô mon beau fiancé. . . .

On the one hand, poetry, music, and fine sentiments.

On the other, the *beau fiancé*, with weak, blinking eyes and clothes that didn't fit him.

"Did you tell any one about it?"

"Nobody."

"Not even your brother?"

"Least of all him."

"And you had been keeping the hammer hidden in your room for a whole month? . . . I see. . . . I'm beginning to understand."

He was also beginning to breathe heavily. For there was something peculiarly oppressive in this strange mixture of tragedy and petty meanness.

He found himself avoiding Anna's eyes as she stood there stock-still, gazing at him.

"You had to make a perfect job of it, because if you were found out, Dr. Van de Weert would never have allowed his daughter to marry Joseph. You thought over every possible weapon. A pistol would make a noise. Germaine never had meals here, so poison was out of the question. If your hands had been strong enough, I dare say you'd have strangled her. . . ."

"I thought of it."

"Don't interrupt! . . . You pinched a hammer from somewhere, for you weren't so stupid as to use anything belonging to the house. . . .

"On what pretext did you bring Germaine up here?"

And Anna answered almost casually:

"She'd been crying in the shop. She was always crying. . . . My mother had given her fifty francs towards her monthly allowance. I went out with her. I told her I could give her the rest. . . ."

"So you both came round in the dark and in by the back door. Maria was playing the piano, so nobody heard. You came upstairs. . . ."

Maigret looked at the door. And in a voice that he tried to keep steady he growled:

"You opened that door, and pushed her in front of you. . . . You got out the hammer . . ."

"No."

"What do you mean?"

"I didn't do it at once. In fact, I'm not sure that I should have had the nerve to do it at all . . . I don't know . . . if she hadn't said something. . . ."

Anna broke off for a moment, and then went on:

"She looked at the bed, saying: 'Oh! So that's where you and my brother used to . . . You've been cleverer than I have. You took good care not to land yourself with a baby.' . . ."

It was all so mean, so stupid, so squalid.

"How many blows?"

"Two. . . . She went down without a groan. I pushed her under the bed."

"Then you rejoined the others downstairs—your mother, Maria, and Marguerite—I suppose she'd come by that time?..."

"My mother was in the kitchen with my father. She was grinding the coffee for the following morning."

"Anna!" called Madame Peeters again. "Why don't you come? Monsieur Machère wants to go."

This time it was Maigret who went out and called down the stairs:

"Tell him to wait."

Then, returning to Anna:

"Did you tell Maria and Marguerite?"

"No. I knew Joseph would be coming. I couldn't move the body alone. But I didn't want anybody to see Joseph arriving. So I sent Maria to meet him on the quay and tell him to leave his motor-bike somewhere and slip in as quietly as possible."

"Wasn't Maria surprised?"

"She was frightened at once—too frightened to ask any questions. She simply did what she was told. I got Mar-

guerite to the piano and asked her to sing. I knew we were bound to make a noise."

"You had already decided to put it in the tank on the roof?"

"Yes."

"So Joseph crept up here. What did he say when he saw the body?"

"Nothing. He couldn't understand. He stared at it, horrified, and it was all he could do to help me put it away."

To put it away! Upstairs. Through the little window in the loft. Dragged along over the slates and shoved into the galvanized iron tank!

Big beads of sweat stood out on Maigret's forehead.

"Of all the murderers I ever met . . ." he began.

But she interrupted him with:

"If I hadn't killed that woman, it would have meant Joseph's death."

"When did you tell Maria?"

"Never. . . . She didn't dare ask any questions. . . . Of course she suspected something, and that's what made her ill."

"And Marguerite?"

"I don't know. If she had any suspicions she succeeded in banishing them. You understand, don't you?"

Did he understand? Only too well! He understood the whole household, including Madame Peeters, who had gone on just as usual, suspecting nothing at all, and who could only be indignant at the slanderous suspicions of the townsfolk.

Including the old man, smoking or dozing in his wicker chair, oblivious even of the visits of the police.

And Joseph, coming to Givet as seldom as possible, leaving his sister to face the music. And Maria, returning home night after night from the convent in an agony of fear lest the worst had happened and the good name of the family was ruined for ever.

"Why did you remove the body from the rain-water tank?"

"In the end it would have smelt. . . . I waited three days. Then on Saturday, when Joseph came, we took it down together and threw it in the river."

There were beads of sweat on her face too. Not on her forehead, but on the down that covered her upper lip.

"Machère was suspicious of us from the start. When he seemed to be hot on the trail, I thought the only thing to do was to get a detective in on our side. . . . If only they hadn't found the body . . ."

"The case would have died a natural death," grunted Maigret. "Only, even without the body, there was Cassin, who had seen you throw it into the Meuse and had fished up the hammer and the coat. . . ."

He started pacing up and down the room. Wasn't Cassin more cynical than even a professional killer? He had known all along, but he had told the police nothing. At least, what he had told them he had told in such a way as to make it of no use to them. One moment he was lying. The next, he was hinting at the truth but pretending it was a lie.

To Gérard he had made out that he knew enough to humble the Peeters family once and for all. But there was a price: two thousand francs.

No sooner was he paid, however, than he went, not to the police, but to Anna. And this time there was a price too, and a much higher one.

Either she must stump up or he would go straight away and give the evidence Gérard had paid him for. If she did stump up, he would disappear and thus let suspicions fall on himself.

There was not enough money in the shop, and it was difficult for her to go out without attracting attention. So she had given Cassin a note for Marguerite, telling her she must at all costs provide what he asked.

Marguerite had paid, and had then run round to the Flemish shop, asking:

"What's the matter? . . . What's it all about?"

"Hush! . . . Joseph will be here in a moment. You'll soon be married now. . . ."

And the fluffy little fiancée had quickly effaced her suspicions.

That Saturday night they must all have breathed more freely in the Flemish house. The danger had passed. Cassin had gone, and so long as he wasn't caught all would be well.

"I suppose it was you who told Maria to sprain her ankle? You were afraid she would give the show away. . . ."

The air was oppressive, suffocating. Marguerite was playing again, but this time it was *The Count of Luxemburg*.

* * * *

Did Anna realize what a monstrous thing she had done? There was no sign of it. She was perfectly calm. She simply stood there waiting, her pale blue eyes as clear as ever. Then, quite quietly, she said:

"They'll be wondering what we're doing."

"You're right. Let's go down."

But she did not move. Standing in the middle of the room, she arrested him with a movement of her hand.

"What are you going to do?"

"I've told you three times," sighed Maigret. "I'm going back to Paris tonight."

"But what about . . .?"

"The rest doesn't concern me. I wasn't sent here. If there's anything further you want to know, you must ask Machère."

"Will you tell him that . . .?"

But Maigret had turned away and was already on the landing. Without answering, he walked downstairs, greeted

once more by the all-pervading smell of the Flemish shop, with that trace of cinnamon which brought back old memories.

A bright line of light shone under the sitting-room door, whose panels picked up the vibrations of the music.

Maigret turned the handle and went in, astonished to find Anna on his heels, for he had not heard her follow him downstairs.

"What sort of a conspiracy have you two been plotting?" asked Dr. Van de Weert jokingly. He had just lit an enormous cigar, which he was sucking like a suckling baby.

"Please excuse us. Mademoiselle Anna was asking my advice about a journey that she seemed to be contemplating."

Marguerite had stopped playing as they came in.

"Are you really, Anna?" she asked.

"Oh, I'm in no hurry about it. But one of these days . . ."

Madame Peeters looked up from her knitting with a slightly uneasy look.

"I've filled up your glass, *Monsieur le commissaire*. I know you won't refuse another glass of our old Schiedam."

Machère, with puckered forehead, was trying hard to guess what had been going on.

As for Joseph, his face was flushed with the schnapps, of which he had drunk several glasses in quick succession.

"Would you like to do me a favour, Mademoiselle Marguerite? Will you play me the *Song of Solveig* again—for the last time?"

And turning to Joseph:

"You turn over the pages for her."

It was sheer perversity on Maigret's part, like pressing on an aching tooth with the tip of one's tongue to make it ache the harder.

From where he was standing, his glass of Schiedam in his hand, his elbow on the mantelpiece, Maigret towered over

the others—Madame Peeters leaning over the table within the glare of the lamp; Van de Weert smoking his cigar and stretching out his little legs; Anna standing against the wall.

And, at the piano, Marguerite playing and singing, with Joseph to turn over the pages.

The top of the piano was covered by a piece of embroidery on which stood a number of framed photographs: Joseph, Anna, and Maria at various ages from infancy upwards.

"*Que Dieu veuille encore . . .*"

But it was still Anna herself who engrossed Maigret's attention. For he could not resign himself to the idea that she had beaten him. He was hoping for something to happen, though he had no idea what.

At any rate he would have liked some sign from this woman who had called him to the rescue. Perhaps a quiver of the lips or a tear. Or she might leave the room precipitately, unable to face him any longer.

The first verse was over, and nothing had happened. Edging up to the inspector, Machère whispered:

"Are we staying much longer?"

"A few minutes."

As these words were exchanged, Anna watched them closely across the table, wondering whether some trap was being laid for her.

" . . . *pour ne plus me quitter . . .*"

The last chords had hardly died out. Madame Peeters, her white head bent over her work, murmured:

"I've never wished any harm to anybody. . . . We're all in God's keeping. . . . It would have been a terrible thing if those two children . . ."

But she was too moved to go on. She wiped away a tear from her cheek with the stocking she was knitting.

And Anna still stood, quietly staring at Maigret. Machère was visibly losing patience.

"Come on," said the inspector. "You'll excuse our rushing off, won't you? My train leaves at seven. . . ."

Everybody stood up. Joseph's eyes flitted hither and thither, avoiding Maigret's above all. Machère groped for some suitable leave-taking and finally stammered:

"I must apologize for having suspected you. . . . But you'll admit that appearances . . . And if Cassin hadn't made off . . "

"Will you show the gentlemen out, Anna?"

"Yes, Mother."

The three of them crossed the shop. It was locked up, being Sunday. But a tiny lamp, which shone on the brass scale-pans, was enough to show them the way.

Machère shook Anna's hand almost effusively.

"Once more . . . I'm so sorry. . . ."

For a few seconds Anna and Maigret eyed each other in silence. Then she muttered:

"You needn't worry. . . . I shan't stay here."

All along the quay, Machère never stopped talking, but Maigret only caught one or two snatches.

". . . now that we know who did it, I can go back to Nancy. . . ."

"I wonder what she meant?" thought Maigret. "*I shan't stay here*. . . . Will she really have the courage? . . ."

He looked at the Meuse, across which glittered the broken reflections of the lights on the other bank. One light, brighter than the others, came from the factory, where old Piedbœuf would later on be baking his potatoes in the cinders at the bottom of the stove.

They passed the little side-street. There was no light in the Piedbœuf's house.

Chapter XI

THE LAST OF ANNA

"Didn't you bring it off this time?"

Madame Maigret was surprised to see her husband come home in such a bad temper. She felt the shoulders of his overcoat after helping him to take it off.

"You've been wandering about in the rain again. One of these days you'll go down with rheumatism, and then you'll be in a nice mess. . . . What was it all about? A murder?"

"A family affair."

"And that girl who came to see you?"

"Girl indeed! Give me my slippers, will you?"

"All right! Have it your own way! I won't ask any more questions! At least not on that subject. . . . Did you have decent meals at Givet?"

"Decent meals? I really don't know."

It was quite true. He had only the vaguest memories of what he'd eaten.

"Well, guess what I've made for you."

"*Guiches.*"

It wasn't very difficult, considering that the whole flat smelt of it.

"Are you hungry?"

"Yes, *ma chérie*. . . . And now, tell me all the news. There was no more bother about the furniture, I suppose?"

Why were his eyes constantly reverting to the same corner of the room, where there was an empty space? He was quite unconscious of it till his wife said to him:

"What's the matter? You seem to be looking for something."

Then he exclaimed out loud:

"Of course! The piano! . . ."

"What piano?"

"Nothing. You wouldn't understand. . . . Your *guiches* are marvellous. . . ."

"It wouldn't be much good being Alsatian if you couldn't make *guiches*. . . . Only, if you go on like that, there'll be precious little left for me. . . . Talking about pianos, the people on the fourth floor . . ."

* * * *

A year later, Maigret entered the premises of a firm of exporters in the Rue Poissonnière. He had been summoned on the discovery of a forged banknote.

The showrooms were enormous and packed with goods, but the offices were small and unpretentious.

"I'll send for the note," said the head of the firm, ringing a bell.

Maigret's eye wandered, and he was vaguely conscious of a grey skirt approaching the desk. Beneath it were cotton stockings. Then he raised his eyes and gazed at the face that was bending over the desk.

"Thank you, Mademoiselle Anna."

The exporter saw Maigret's eye follow her out.

"She looks a bit fierce," he explained, "but you couldn't wish for a better secretary. She does just precisely the work of two: all the correspondence, and the accounts as well."

"Have you had her long?"

"Ten months."

"Is she married?"

"Oh no! Far from it. That's her one little failing—a

detestation of the masculine sex. One day a business acquaintance, who had come to see me, tried to take liberties, and she gave him just one look that fairly shrivelled him up. You ought to have seen it. . . .

"She's here at eight o'clock sharp, if not earlier. And she's always the last to go. . . . I think she must be a foreigner, as she has a slight accent, but she's not the sort one asks a lot of questions . . ."

"Would you mind if I had a word with her?"

"By all means. I'll call her in again."

"No. I'd rather it was in her own room."

Maigret went through a glass-panelled door. A small office whose windows looked out on to a yard full of lorries. The whole house vibrated with the ceaseless flow of cars and buses along the Rue Poissonnière.

Anna was calm, calm as she had been when bending over her employer's desk, calm as he had always known her. Her age would now be twenty-seven, but anybody would have taken her for well over thirty. She had faded. There was no longer any freshness in her features or her complexion.

A few years more, and she would look middle-aged. A few more still, and she would look positively old.

"How's your brother?"

She looked away without answering, at the same time fidgeting with her blotter.

"Is he married?"

She merely nodded.

"Happy?"

At that word, the tears that Maigret had waited for a year ago came at last. Her throat swelled.

"He's taken to drink. . . . Marguerite's expecting a baby."

She threw the words at him, as though she held him personally responsible for everything.

"Is he getting on in his profession?"

"He set up on his own, but it wasn't a success. He's now taken a post in Rheims where he only gets a thousand francs a month. . . ."

She dabbed her eyes with her handkerchief, or rather jabbed at them furiously.

"Maria?"

"She died a week before taking the veil."

The telephone bell rang, and it was in another voice that Anna answered, as she automatically pulled a pad towards her and picked up a pencil:

"Yes, Monsieur Worms. . . . Certainly. . . . Tomorrow evening. . . . I'll cable them at once. . . . By the way, we've sent you a letter about that consignment of wool. I'm afraid there are one or two complaints. . . . No. I've no time now. It's fully explained in the letter. . . ."

She rang off. Her employer was standing in the doorway, looking from one to the other. The inspector returned with him to his room.

"What did I tell you? . . . Honest as the day, and as for competence. . . . You can tell in a moment, can't you?"

"Where does she live?"

"I can't give you her address offhand. But I know it's a women's hostel run by some society or other. . . . But . . . I'm beginning to be scared. Don't tell me you've had dealings with her already in your official capacity. I shouldn't care very much about having a secretary who'd been mixed up in anything criminal. . . ."

"You needn't worry," answered Maigret slowly. "It wasn't in my official capacity."

And then more briskly:

"Now! About this note—you found it . . ."

But as he listened to the exporter's story he had one ear

pricked for the sounds in the next room. She was telephoning again.

"No, monsieur. He's engaged at the moment. This is Mademoiselle Anna speaking. I think I can tell you anything you want to know. . . ."

Gustave Cassin of the *Etoile Polaire* was never heard of again.

THE *GUINGUETTE* BY THE SEINE

Translated from the French:

La Guinguette à Deux Sous

Chapter I

A FLAT-BRIMMED TOP-HAT

A RADIANT late afternoon. An almost treacly sunshine oozing through the peaceful streets on the left bank of the Seine. An easy-going gaiety shining in every face, and echoing in each familiar sound.

There are days like that. Days when existence is less commonplace than usual, days when trivial gestures seem somehow charged with vitality, and passers-by on the pavement or passengers in trams are invested with some heightened personality.

It was the 27th of June. When Maigret reached the gate of the Santé he found the policeman on guard gazing foolishly at a little white cat which was playing with the dog from the dairy over the way.

There are days when footsteps strike a more sonorous note. Maigret's did, as he crossed the immense courtyard to disappear through a doorway on the other side.

At the end of a long corridor he asked a warder :

"Has he been told ?"

"Not yet."

A key turned in a lock. A bolt shot back. A very clean cell with a very high ceiling. A man, who rose to his feet, while by his face he seemed uncertain what expression to adopt.

"Well, Lenoir ? You all right ?"

The prisoner nearly smiled, but his features hardened as an idea flashed through his mind. He frowned mistrustfully,

and for a few seconds his mouth was drawn into a snarl; then he shrugged his shoulders and held out his hand.

"I see," he said.

"What?"

A cynical smile.

"Come on! You needn't play that game with me. If you've come, it's . . ."

"It's because I'm going on leave tomorrow, and . . ."

Lenoir laughed dryly. He was tall and young, with dark hair combed back from the forehead, well-cut features, and fine chestnut-coloured eyes. His neat black moustache showed up the whiteness of his teeth, which were sharp as a rodent's.

"Very kind of you, *Monsieur le commissaire*. . . ."

He stretched, yawned, and put down the lid of the lavatory pan, which stood gaping in a corner of the cell.

"I wasn't expecting visitors. . . ."

Then suddenly, looking Maigret straight in the eye:

"They've turned it down, haven't they?"

No use trying to break the news gently. He had understood. He started pacing up and down the cell.

"I knew they would. . . . So when is it? . . . Tomorrow?"

All the same, the voice faltered ever so slightly over that last word, and the eyes greedily drank in the daylight that came through the narrow window high up on the wall.

At the same moment, people sitting in front of the cafés were scanning their evening papers, in which it was announced:

The President of the Republic has refused his consent to the reprieve of Jean Lenoir, the young ringleader of the Belleville gang. The execution will take place at dawn tomorrow.

* * * *

It was Maigret himself who, three months before, had put

his hand on Lenoir in a hotel in the Rue Saint-Antoine. It had been touch and go. Another second, and the gangster's revolver would have been pointing at the pit of his stomach instead of at the floor.

That, however, was all in the day's work, and the inspector bore him no grudge. On the contrary, he had taken rather a fancy to him. Partly because Lenoir was young. No more than twenty-two, though he had been sentenced heaven knows how often since his fifteenth birthday. But still more because he was game.

The crime had not been done single-handed. Two others of the gang had, in fact, probably played a more active part in the hold-up than he had. They had both been arrested.

But Lenoir had taken the whole thing on his own shoulders. The police had tried to get at him from every angle, but he had steadily refused to rise to any bait.

And there was no pose about him, no swagger. Nor did he take the pathetic line and blame circumstances or social injustice for his own misdemeanours.

"You win!" was all he'd said.

Now it was all over. Or rather it soon would be. That sun which streaked diagonally across one of the cell walls had only to peep over the horizon next morning. . . .

And, in spite of himself, Lenoir's hand felt the back of his neck. His face turned a shade paler.

"It doesn't feel too good," he sneered.

Then, in a sudden outburst of rancour :

"If only all the others came too. There are plenty who deserve it just as much as I do."

Still walking up and down, he shot a shrewd glance at Maigret.

"All right, old chap! No need to prick your ears! I'm

not giving anybody away. . . . Not but what I wouldn't like to. . . ."

Maigret avoided looking at him. He could feel the confession coming, but he knew very well that Lenoir would shy off at the least thing—a word of misplaced sympathy or the slightest display of eager interest.

"Of course you wouldn't know the *Guinguette à Deux Sous*. . . . One of those riverside places where you can sit and booze in the garden. Just like any other *guinguette*, for that matter. No reason why you should know it. But if you ever fetch up there, you'll run into someone who'd fit just as well as I shall on that machine of yours tomorrow. . . ."

Quite unable to keep still, he went on pacing up and down. It was the only sign of his inward commotion. Maigret was fascinated.

"But you won't. . . . And you'll never catch him. . . . Look here! Without spilling any beans I can tell you a little story. . . . I don't know why it comes back to me all of a sudden. Perhaps because it belongs to the days when I was new to the business. I suppose I was about sixteen. . . . There were two of us. We used to go round the bars and cheap dancing-places together. My pal's in a sanatorium now—that is, if he's still alive. He was coughing his lungs up even in those days."

Why was he saying all this? Perhaps he needed to talk, to prove he was still alive himself, to prove he was still a man. . . .

"One night—it must have been about one o'clock . . . we were strolling along a street—just an ordinary street: you don't need to know the name. . . . Some distance ahead a door opened. There was a car standing by the kerb. And a chap came out of the house, pushing another in front of him. No, pushing's the wrong word. Imagine a chap arm-in-arm with a tailor's dummy, or as if he was giving a

helping hand to a fellow who was soused. . . . He shoved him into the back of the car, and then took the wheel. . . .

"I caught my pal's eye, and by the time the car had started the two of us were on the rear bumper. They used to call me 'the cat,' and it wasn't a bad name either. . . .

"Well, off we drove. The chap took us all over the shop. Seemed to be looking for something. More than once he turned and went back. But as soon as he struck the Canal Saint-Martin we tumbled to it. I don't need to tell you what he was up to the time he opened the door and shut it again; and the carcass was in the ditch. . . .

"A nice clean job. The bloke's pockets must have been full of lead, for he didn't float a second. The only thing that rather spoilt it was our being there.

"A wink from Victor, and we were hanging on to the car again. We thought the chap would be a nice one to have the address of. He stopped in the Place de la République, where there was a café still open, and swallowed down a glass of rum. Then he put his car away in a garage and went home. We saw a light go on in one of the flats, so we had no difficulty in finding him again. . . .

"For two years we squeezed him, Victor and me. We were new to it, and we were frightened of asking too much. . . . A few hundred francs at a time, no more. . . .

"Then one day we found he'd flown. Clean gone. We couldn't find a trace of him. . . . And then—would you believe it?—if I didn't run slap into him at the *Guinguette à Deux Sous*. That was three months ago—and the chap didn't even recognize me."

Lenoir spat. Automatically he put a hand to his pocket for a cigarette.

"When a bloke's in my place," he muttered, "they might at least let him smoke!"

Maigret was staring at the bed. In a voice that was as indifferent as he could make it he asked:

"But you never knew who it was—the man whose body . . .?"

"Funnily enough, we did. But there's no need for me to tell you."

The ray of sunshine had disappeared from the wall. Steps could be heard approaching in the corridor.

"Don't think I'm wanting to make myself out any better than I am. But that chap I've been talking about would do very well in my place on the . . ."

They almost spurted out: beads of sweat on Lenoir's forehead. His legs went limp. He sat down on the edge of the bed.

"You'd better leave me," he sighed. "Or rather, no! . . . Perhaps I could do with a bit of company today. Better keep talking. . . . Would you like me to tell you about Marcelle? The woman who . . ."

The door opened. The condemned man's lawyer hesitated at the sight of Maigret. He had twisted his face into a professional smile. He was wondering how to break it gently to his client that his last hope had gone.

"I just looked in to talk things over . . ." he began evasively.

"You can chuck that!" snapped Lenoir.

Then to Maigret:

"Goodbye, *Monsieur le commissaire.* I don't suppose we'll be seeing much more of each other. . . . No hard feelings: everybody to his trade. . . . And, by the way, I shouldn't waste time looking for that fellow. Even if you found him, he's probably as smart as you are by this time. . . ."

Maigret held out his hand. He saw the man's nostrils quiver. There were beads of sweat on the little black moustache too, and two sharp canines were biting into the lower lip.

"One way or another," said Lenoir with a forced laugh. "What does it matter? This way . . . or typhoid. . . ."

* * * *

Maigret didn't go away, after all. At the last moment his holiday was postponed by a ticklish case concerning forged bonds. He was at it night and day and hadn't much time to think of the *Guinguette à Deux Sous*. All the same, he didn't forget it, and one day at the Quai des Orfèvres he mentioned the place to one of his colleagues.

"On the Seine, you say? Never heard of it. Would it be upstream or downstream?"

But Maigret couldn't even tell him that much.

Lenoir had been sixteen at the time, or so he'd said. That would make it six years ago. And one evening when Maigret was waiting for a report to come in, he whiled away the time turning over the criminal records of that year.

People had disappeared, as they always did. The only sensational case was that of a woman's body cut in pieces, the head of which was never found. As for the Canal Saint-Martin, it had produced a crop of six corpses that year.

The forged bonds gave more and more trouble, and then, when the case was finally wound up, the inspector hurried off to Alsace with Madame Maigret, who always spent one of the summer months there with her sister.

He only spent a couple of days there himself, but he promised to take his holiday as soon as possible—or at any rate a week-end.

Day by day, Paris emptied. The asphalt grew softer and softer under foot. Pedestrians chose the shady side of the street, and the terraces of the cafés were full to overflowing.

A fortnight slipped by, and Maigret was still pottering

about, squaring up the arrears of work that had accumulated during the forged bonds case. At last Madame Maigret sent a telegram :

Expecting you without fail Sunday. Love from all.

So on Saturday—it was the 26th of July—he tidied up his desk, and told them in the office that he'd be out of town till late Monday night.

As he picked up his bowler, his eye lighted on the brim where the ribbon was worn through. As a matter of fact, it had been like that for weeks, and Madame Maigret had told him at least half a dozen times to buy a new one.

"If you go about like that much longer, they'll be giving you coppers in the street."

Catching sight of a hatter's in the Boulevard Saint-Martin, he went in, and began trying on bowlers, all of which were too small for him.

"You'll find this one just right, sir," the measly little shop-assistant kept repeating.

Maigret was never more unhappy than when trying on clothes. In utter misery he stared into the glass, waiting for more bowlers to be brought him.

Behind him, in the mirror, he could see a man's back, and a head on which was perched a rather old-fashioned top-hat. As the man was in rough tweeds, the effect was decidedly ridiculous.

"Haven't you anything older still ? I'm not really going to wear it. . . ."

Gloomily Maigret wondered how much longer he was to be kept waiting.

"It's only a joke. The whole thing's a rag. We're staging a village marriage at a place we go to, the *Guinguette à Deux Sous*. Just between friends—and we're all taking a part.

Bride, bridesmaids, and all the rest of it. I'm to be the mayor. So you see the style of thing I want?"

The customer chuckled. He was a man about thirty-five, hale and hearty, who would be taken anywhere for a prosperous business man.

"For instance, if you had one with a flat brim . . ."

"I think we've got just the thing you want. If you wouldn't mind waiting a moment, I'll go up to the workshop."

Another pile of bowlers. The first Maigret tried fitted him perfectly, but he was no longer in a hurry. In fact, he only made his final choice just in time to follow the other customer out of the shop. He hailed a passing taxi, in case it should be necessary.

It was. For the other dived into a car that was standing by the side of the road, started it up, and drove off towards the Rue Vielle-du-Temple.

Here he stopped at a second-hand shop. Old clothes and bric-à-brac. The typical *brocanteur*. It was half an hour before he emerged with a large flat cardboard box which obviously contained the suit that was to go with the flat-brimmed top-hat.

The Champs-Élysées, then the Avenue de Wagram. The next stop was at a little bar at a street corner, where he only spent a bare five minutes, returning to the car accompanied by a jolly-faced, buxom little woman who by her looks was just on the right side of thirty.

Twice Maigret had looked at his watch. He had already missed the train he'd intended catching. And now the next would be leaving in a quarter of an hour. But he shrugged his shoulders and answered the driver's enquiring look with:

"Go on. Keep them in sight."

It was pretty well what he expected: the car stopped next

in front of a tall building in the Avenue Niel. The couple disappeared through the entrance. After waiting a quarter of an hour, Maigret followed, reading as he passed the words on the brass plate:

Bachelor apartments by the month or by the day.

A perfumed manageress was sitting in the little office, which smelt of middle-class adultery.

"*Police Judiciaire!* . . . The couple that's just gone in? . . ."

"What couple?"

But she soon gave up stalling.

"Most respectable people—both of them married. They come twice a week."

When he went out, the inspector looked through the car window at the little brass plate, the *plaque d'identité*, that bears the owner's name and address.

Marcel Basso
32 Quai d'Austerlitz
Paris

* * * *

The warm air was stagnant. The buses and trams that fed the stations were packed. Taxis had deck-chairs on their roofs, fishing-rods protruding from their windows, and a heap of luggage by the driver's side.

The glistening asphalt reflected a bluish light. At every café terrace a clatter of saucers. . . .

"Exactly four weeks," mused Maigret, "since Lenoir was . . ."

It hadn't aroused much interest. Just an everyday matter—a professional criminal meeting a professional death. Maigret remembered his quivering nostrils and the neat little black moustache. He looked at his watch and sighed.

Too late now to think of joining his wife. She and her sister would walk down to meet the last train, and the latter would not fail to mutter:

"There you are! Always the same!"

The taxi-driver was reading a paper. The top-hat customer came out first, looking to see the coast was clear before beckoning to his companion, who remained inside.

They stopped in the Place des Ternes. Through the rear window the couple could be seen kissing. Then the woman hailed a passing taxi, and jumped in, only letting go of the man's hand at the very last moment.

The car drove on.

"Do you still want me to follow?"

"You may as well, while you're about it."

It wasn't very interesting. But at any rate he'd found somebody who knew the *Guinguette à Deux Sous*.

Quai d'Austerlitz. A huge board, on which was painted:

Marcel Basso
Coal and Coke Merchant and Importer
Wholesale and Retail
Special Summer Prices

A yard surrounded by a blackened fence. Opposite, on the other side of the road, there were cranes on the quay, barges lying alongside, and another board bearing Marcel Basso's name. A heap of coal that had just been unloaded. . . . To one side of the coal-merchant's yard stood a large private house in villa style. Monsieur Basso parked his car, looked down to make sure there was no hair or powder on his clothes and went in.

Maigret next caught sight of him through a wide-open window on the first floor. He was with a tall, fair, good-looking woman. They were talking eagerly and laughing.

Monsieur Basso tried on the top-hat again in front of the glass.

They seemed to be packing. A white-aproned maid kept coming in and out of the room.

A quarter of an hour later—it had gone five—the whole household appeared at the front door. First of all a boy of ten, carrying an airgun. Then the servant, Monsieur and Madame Basso, the gardener with the luggage.

The whole scene was brimming with good-humour. The whole of Paris, for that matter. Cars passed constantly, heading for the country. At the Gare de Lyons, where they were running double services, engines whistled wildly.

Madame Basso took the seat next her husband's. The boy got in at the back, with the luggage, and lowered both of the windows.

The car was nothing grand. Just a good, ordinary, dark blue car like a thousand others. It must have been purchased quite recently.

A few minutes later they were driving along towards Villeneuve-Saint-Georges, after which they took the Corbeil road. On the other side of Corbeil they turned off into a low-lying narrow road that ran beside the river.

Mon Loisir.

That's what it was called, the Bassos' villa, which overlooked a stretch of the river between Morsang and Seineport. A newly built house, the brickwork bright red, the paintwork unweathered. The flowers in the garden seemed to have been washed that morning.

A little white-painted jetty with a spring-board. A couple of boats moored to the river-bank.

"Do you know this part?" Maigret asked the driver.

"A bit."

"Is there any place to put up at?"

"At the *Vieux Garçon*. That's in Morsang. . . . And there's a place in Seineport. *Chez Marins*—I think that's the name."

"And the *Guinguette à Deux Sous*?"

The driver shook his head. Never heard of it.

The taxi couldn't stay there much longer without attracting attention. The Bassos' car had already disgorged its load. In less than ten minutes after their arrival Madame Basso appeared in the garden in sailor clothes of red-brown canvas, or *toile de Concarneau*, and an American sailor cap.

Her husband, on the other hand, was in a hurry to get into his fancy-dress. He appeared at a window, buttoned up in an impossible frock-coat and with the flat-brimmed top-hat on his head.

"What do you say to that?" he called out.

"You haven't forgotten the sash, I hope?"

"What sash?"

"Doesn't a mayor wear a red-white-and-blue sash, silly? . . ."

Boats glided by lazily on the river. Far away in the distance a tug blew a long blast on its siren. The sun was just sinking into the trees on the hill downstream.

"Make it the *Vieux Garçon*," said Maigret.

A dozen cars were parked to one side, while behind the inn was a wide terrace on the river-bank. Boats of every description in the water below.

"Do you want me to wait?"

"I'll let you know. . . ."

The first person he met was a woman, dressed all in white and with a wreath of orange-blossom on her head. She was running for all she was worth, and nearly went full tilt into the inspector. A young man in bathing-costume was chasing her. Both were convulsed with laughter.

Others in the garden were watching the scene. One shouted out :

"Now then ! Don't go mauling the bride ! "

"At any rate till the wedding's over," cried another.

The bride stopped, panting for breath, and Maigret at once recognized the lady who twice a week paid flying visits to the Avenue Niel accompanied by Monsieur Basso.

A man in a green rowing-boat was putting away his fishing-gear, his forehead wrinkled as though he was engaged on some difficult and arduous task.

Another young man came out of the inn, ordering drinks over his shoulder !

"*Cinq Pernods. . . . Cinq. . . .*"

His face was covered with grease-paint. He was got up to play the part of a coarse-grained, boisterous, spotty peasant.

"Do I look all right ?"

"No. You ought to have had red hair."

A car drew up. The people who alighted were already dressed for the village wedding. One woman wore a puce silk dress which trailed along the ground. Her husband had stuffed a cushion under his waistcoat to give himself a paunch, while across it, in place of a watch-chain, lay a length of chain cable borrowed from a boat.

The sun's rays had turned red. Hardly a leaf stirred in the evening stillness.

"When are the brakes coming ?"

Maigret wandered round, not knowing quite what to do with himself.

"What about the Bassos ?"

"They overtook us on the road."

Suddenly Maigret found another member of the party standing right in front of him. A man in the early thirties, though already almost completely bald. A face like a

clown's. A gleam of sardonic humour sparkled in his eye. When he spoke, it was with a strong English accent.

"Just the man we want!" he said, looking at Maigret.

"What for?" asked someone.

"What's he look like? . . . A notary, of course! No one seems to have thought of the marriage contract."

Then, turning to Maigret with the easy familiarity of a drunkard, he went on:

"You'll be our notary, won't you, old boy? . . . Come on. We're going to have a grand time. But first of all you must have a drink."

And he led Maigret off by the arm amid general laughter, while one woman muttered:

"Really! . . . James! . . . He's got the cheek of the devil."

But James seemed to take it very easily in his stride. With an air of casual intimacy he swept Maigret indoors and into the bar.

Ten minutes later, Maigret found a pretext to sneak out and pay off his taxi.

Chapter II

THE WEDDING-FEAST

ON his arrival at the *Guinguette à Deux Sous*, Maigret had only been mildly interested in what he was doing. The case hadn't clicked. Following Monsieur Basso, he had known that ten to one he was on a wild-goose chase. At the *Vieux Garçon* he had looked round him dully, without experiencing that sudden spurt of interest which meant that some intuitive nostril had picked up a trail.

Nor did his clinking glasses with James succeed in plunging him into the atmosphere of a case. The curtain hadn't gone up, and his spirit remained aloof as he watched the rest of the party assemble, while fresh costumes, each more absurd than the last, were proudly displayed to guffaws or splutterings of laughter. The Bassos had joined up, their boy, as a carrot-haired village idiot, being the biggest hit of all.

"Don't worry about them," said James each time Maigret turned round. "They're happy enough—though they haven't had a dozen drinks between them!"

Two old-fashioned brakes drove up. More laughter, jostling, and nudging as the party scrambled in. Maigret took the seat that was offered him by James' side. The inn-keeper, his wife, and all the servants crowded round the entrance to the *Vieux Garçon* to give them a suitable send-off.

The sunset had given place to a bluish twilight. On the other side of the river stood peaceful country-houses, whose lighted windows shimmered through the dusk.

The brakes trundled along the narrow road. Almost

grudgingly, the inspector's eye took in the faces around him. The coachman, the butt of a good deal of raillery, who laughed back rather sourly; a girl made up as Bécassine, the proverbial little slavey, up from the country, who was practising a local accent; a grey-haired gentleman, got up as a grandmother.

It was altogether a strange turn-out, so unexpected as to be rather confusing. It was difficult to bring these people into focus, and Maigret could only make the vaguest of guesses as to what sort of people they were in everyday life.

"That's my wife, sitting over there," said James, pointing to the plumpest of the women, who wore exaggerated leg-of-mutton sleeves.

He said it in a voice of resignation, and the twinkle in his eye grew for a moment sad.

They sang. As they drove through Seineport, people rushed out on to their doorsteps to see them pass. Little boys ran after them, cheering and waving.

The drivers reined in, and they crossed the bridge at a walk. An innkeeper's sign-board was just visible in the failing light.

Eugène Rougier—Débitant.

A tiny little house, all white, squeezed in between the towing-path and the hillside. The lettering on the sign-board was primitive to a degree. As they came closer, they could hear snatches of music, punctuated by grinding and squeaking.

What was it that suddenly brought the "click"? Maigret couldn't have told you himself. Was it the little white house, so humble, with its two lighted windows, contrasting with this sudden farcical invasion?

Or was it the couple that came forward to inspect the wedding-party? The man was a young factory-hand. With him a pretty girl in a pink silk dress, her hands on her hips. . . .

The house itself was really no more than a good-sized cottage of two rooms with the front door between them. In the room on the right, an old woman was fussing round the kitchen range. In the one on the left, Maigret caught a glimpse of a bed and some family portraits.

The bar was behind. Nothing more than a large lean-to with one side completely open on to the garden. Tables and benches. A bar. An automatic piano. Lanterns.

Some bargees were drinking at the bar. A twelve-year-old girl was looking after the automatic piano, winding it up every few minutes and putting two sous in the slot.

Yes. Whatever it was, something had clicked and the case was on. The case of the *Guinguette à Deux Sous*.

* * * *

The place was soon bubbling over with exuberance. The newcomers were no sooner out of the brakes than they cleared away the tables and started dancing. Others called for drinks. Maigret lost sight of James for a moment, but he soon caught sight of him at the bar, leaning pensively over a Pernod.

There were also tables under the trees in the garden. A waiter was laying them. The driver of one of the brakes sighed as he said to his mate:

"Let's hope they won't keep it up all night. . . ."

"Not much use hoping," answered the other. "It's Saturday."

Maigret was left to himself. Standing all alone, he slowly turned round and surveyed his surroundings: the little house with smoke pouring out of one of the chimneys, the two brakes, the shed behind, the factory-hand out with his best girl, the dressed-up crowd of merry-makers.

"That's it, all right," he grunted to himself.

A riverside inn with a garden—*une guinguette*. *La Guinguette à Deux Sous*. . . . Would that refer to the poverty of the place? Or to the two sous you had to put in the old bumble-jar when you wanted some music?

And it was the haunt of a murderer. Had been, at any rate. Was he still hanging about? That factory-hand? A bargee? Or even one of the party?

James, for instance, or Monsieur Basso?

There was no electric light. The shed was lit up by two oil-lanterns, and others stood on the tables in the garden. So, when night fell, the scene was divided up into patches of light and darkness.

Dinner was ready, and the cry went up:

"*A table! . . . On mange! . . .*"

But the words had little effect. The dancing went on, while those at the bar ordered fresh drinks. Another round, a third, a fourth, and by the time the company were seated the majority of them were well under way.

The innkeeper's wife brought on the food and served it herself, enquiring anxiously whether it was all right—the soup, the omelette, the rabbit. But nobody bothered to answer her. As a matter of fact, what with talking, laughing, and drinking, few had any idea whether they were eating good food or bad.

The noise they made drowned the automatic piano that was still being fed with coppers, and the voices of the bargees who conversed phlegmatically on the canals of Northern France and Belgium and the electric haulage that was being introduced at many of the locks.

The factory-hand and his girl were the only couple dancing now. They danced cheek to cheek, but their eyes constantly returned to the uproarious wedding-feast.

Not a soul Maigret knew, not a face he had ever set eyes on

before. On one side of him was a woman made up preposterously with a faint moustache—and not so faint as all that—and beauty-spots dotted about all over her face. She had promptly christened him Uncle Arthur.

"Pass the salt, Uncle Arthur. . . ."

They called each other by their Christian names, they dug each other in the ribs to attract attention, or kicked each other under the table. Were they really such intimate friends? Or just a crowd of people that had been thrown together by chance?

And what would they be in ordinary life? Maigret's thoughts kept on reverting to that question. The man dressed up as a grandmother, for instance—what might he be?

Or the woman disguised as a flapper, who spoke all the time in a falsetto voice?

Well-to-do middle-class people, like Monsieur Basso—that seemed the most likely answer. Still, it was impossible to tell.

Monsieur Basso sat beside the bride. He kept his hands off her scrupulously, but now and again he gave her a meaning look whose significance Maigret was possibly the only one to guess:

"We had a grand time this afternoon, didn't we?"

Avenue Niel. Bachelor apartments for middle-class adultery. . . .

Would her husband be amongst the party? . . .

Someone let off a squib. Then Bengal lights flared up under the trees. The dancing couple stopped and, hand-in-hand, stared tenderly at the brightly coloured flames. And the girl exclaimed:

"It's just like a play."

Yet it was the haunt of a murderer!

"Speech! . . . Speech! . . . Speech! . . ."

With a delighted smile on his lips, Monsieur Basso rose. He bowed, he hemmed and hawed, feigning embarrassment, and finally began a rambling discourse, full of absurdities and pompous platitudes, punctuated by thunders of applause.

Only, now and again, his eye fell on Maigret's face, the only grave face at the table. And each time, Monsieur Basso's eye passed on with a flicker of embarrassment that was no longer put on.

And yet, after a moment, he couldn't help looking back once more.

"... and I must ask you, ladies and gentlemen, to raise your glasses and join me in the toast: *Vive la Mariée!*"

And everyone but Maigret shouted:

"*Vive la Mariée!*"

Everyone was standing now. Glasses were clinked. Kisses were showered on the bride. With that the feast was over and the dancing started again.

Maigret saw Monsieur Basso go up to James and ask him something—in all probability:

"Who is he?"

The answer was audible.

"I don't know. . . . Just a pal . . . a rattling good fellow."

The abandoned tables looked desolate now. The shed, on the other hand, was packed with dancers. Little by little, quite a crowd had gathered round to watch the spectacle, dim figures in the darkness, hardly distinguishable from the tree trunks.

Champagne corks popped.

"Come and have a brandy," said James. "I take it you're not a dancer."

A queer chap. He had drunk enough in the course of the evening to lay out five strong men, yet he wasn't really drunk. He slouched along in a desultory way and with an air of

detachment, leading Maigret into the kitchen, where he sat down in the landlord's high-backed arm-chair.

The latter's wife was bustling to and fro.

"Eugène! Here!... They've ordered another six bottles of bubbly. You'd better get one of the drivers to fetch some more from Corbeil."

A middle-aged woman, getting on for fifty. The old woman with the rounded back, who was washing up, was obviously her mother.

A typical cottage interior, very poor indeed. A grandfather clock in carved walnut.... And James took the bottle of cognac he had ordered and filled two glasses to the brim. Then, stretching out his legs, he leant back in his chair.

"Here's to you!..."

They couldn't see the dancing, but they could hear it. At that distance the sound had fused into a compact mass of talk, laughter, music, and the slip of feet. Out through the open door, invisible in the night, the Seine flowed by.

"What a place!" sneered James. "Everything the heart can desire, including plenty of dark corners to cuddle in."

There was something about James which told you he was not the man to steal a kiss in a dark corner.

"I don't mind betting they're at it already at the bottom of the garden."

He watched the old grandmother, bent over the basin of water.

"Come on! Let's have a cloth."

And with a casual air, but with careful movements, he patiently dried the pile of plates and glasses, only stopping from time to time to take a gulp of brandy.

Now and again someone passed the door. Maigret took advantage of a moment when James was talking to the old

grandmother, and slipped out. He hadn't taken ten steps outside when someone asked him for a light. It was the grey-haired man in woman's clothes.

"Thanks. Don't you dance either?"

"Never."

"Not like my wife. She hasn't stopped for a second."

And with a sudden intuition, Maigret asked:

"The bride?"

"Yes. And if she stands about afterwards, she'll be sure to catch cold."

He sighed. He was absurd, with his middle-aged man's face over an old lady's tight bodice and full skirt.

Once more Maigret wondered what he did for a living, and what he looked like in his everyday clothes. To sound him, he asked:

"I can't help feeling we've met before. . . ."

"I was just thinking the same. Where could it have been? . . . Or perhaps you've come to my shop. A hosier's on the Grands Boulevards. . . ."

"Perhaps. . . ."

His wife was making more noise than any two others. She was as tight as a lord. She was dancing with Basso, and was clinging to him in such a way that Maigret turned his head away.

"A queer little girl," sighed her husband.

Little girl, indeed! A full-bodied woman of twenty-eight or nine, with sensual lips and a challenging eye, who seemed utterly abandoned to her partner.

"When she once gets going, she's altogether wild," sighed her husband.

Maigret looked hard at him. Was the hosier angry with his wife or proud of her?

Suddenly there were shouts. The party was being called

together for the final ceremony of conducting the married couple to the bridal chamber. There was a hunt for the bridegroom, who was at last discovered at the far end of the garden.

The bridal chamber was a little outhouse beyond the shed. The door was opened. Maigret kept one eye on the real husband, who looked on, smiling.

"First of all, the garter . . ." said someone.

The rite was observed. It was Monsieur Basso who removed it, cut it into small pieces, handing one to each member of the gang as a souvenir. Then bride and bridegroom were pushed into the outhouse and the door was locked.

"She loves a rag of this sort," said the hosier. "Are you married too?"

"Me? . . . Yes."

"But your wife's not here, is she?"

"No. She's away in the country."

"Does she like young people too?"

Maigret couldn't make out whether the other was pulling his leg or speaking seriously. A minute or two later he slipped away. Crossing the garden, he saw the factory-hand and his girl standing behind a tree bush, locked in each other's arms.

In the kitchen, James was still drying glasses, while he never stopped emptying others. At the same time he was having a quiet, homely chat with the old grandmother.

"What are they up to now?" he asked Maigret. "Have you seen my wife?"

"I didn't notice her."

"She's fat enough."

The end came almost abruptly. It must have been round about one in the morning. Someone whispered to his neigh-

bour that it was time to think of going. The neighbour said the same to someone else. A man was being sick near the river-bank. The bride and bridegroom had long ago been released. Only a few of the younger ones were still dancing.

One of the drivers went to find James.

"Are you going to be much longer? My old woman's been expecting me for the last hour, and . . ."

"Oh! So you're married too?"

James gave the signal. The party was rounded up, and the brakes trundled homewards. Some nodded in their seats, while others kept the ball rolling, singing and laughing, though with ebbing gusto.

They passed a group of sleeping barges. Far off a train whistled.

The Bassos were put down at their door. The hosier and his wife had already been dropped at Seineport. A woman was scolding her drunken husband in an undertone:

"I'll tell you about it tomorrow. I saw what you did. . . . It's no use arguing. I simply shan't listen. . . ."

The sky was studded with stars, which were reflected by the river. At the *Vieux Garçon*, all was asleep. Hand-shakes all round.

"Sailing tomorrow?"

"I think we're going fishing."

"Good night."

A long passage. A row of bedrooms. Maigret asked James:

"Is there one for me? I didn't book one. . . ."

"Take any. The first empty one you come to. If you don't find one, you can share mine."

Lights were switched on. Boots and shoes thrown on the floor. Bed-springs creaking. Lights switched off.

A lot of loud whispering in one of the rooms. No doubt the woman who had something to tell her husband. . . .

* * * *

It was eleven o'clock in the morning, the day hot and sunny. The party had reverted once more to their normal selves, and Maigret had no longer to make an effort to see through their disguise. Waitresses in black dresses and white aprons bustled about on the terrace laying the tables.

People lounged in deck-chairs or wandered from group to group. Some were still in pyjamas, some in sailor trousers, the remainder being for the most part in flannels.

"Mouth like the bottom of a parrot-cage?"

"Not so bad as all that. What about yours?"

Some were away fishing; others had already returned. Some were sailing, some were rowing.

The hosier was in a well-cut grey flannel suit. Obviously a man who set great store by being well groomed. Seeing Maigret, he walked up to him.

"Allow me to introduce myself—Monsieur Feinstein. . . . I mentioned my shop yesterday, but I trade under the name of Marcel."

"Did you have a good night?"

"Anything but! As I expected, my wife was taken ill. It's the same every time. And she knows perfectly well she has a weak heart."

He wasn't altogether natural. He seemed to be watching for Maigret's reactions as he went on:

"Have you seen her this morning?"

He looked round, finally spotting her in a sailing-boat with four or five others dressed in bathing-costumes. Monsieur Basso was at the helm.

"Is this your first visit to Morsang? A charming spot.

It'll grow on you—you'll see. We have the place practically to ourselves. The same crowd come every week-end. Do you play bridge?"

"A bit."

"We shall be playing later on. You know Monsieur Basso, I suppose? One of the biggest coal-merchants in Paris. Such a nice fellow. That's his own boat he's sailing. His wife's wild about every kind of sport."

"And James?"

"I bet he's having a Pernod—and not his first either. It's all he lives for. Dreadful when it catches them so young. . . . He could have made a career for himself if he'd taken the trouble. He works in an English bank in the Place Vendôme. Plenty of better jobs have been offered him, but he's always turned them down. No ambition whatever. They finish work at the bank at five, and that suits him down to the ground. The rest of the day, he's bar-crawling. You can generally find him in one of the cafés in the Rue Royale. . . ."

"And that young chap—the tall one?"

"Son of a jeweller."

"And the man fishing over there?"

"A builder. He's the keenest fisherman of the lot. Fishing, boating, swimming, bridge . . . those are the chief occupations here. We're a very happy family. Most of them stay here, but a few of us have our own villas or bungalows. Ours is at Seineport."

A long stretch of the river was visible, and just where it turned was the little white house, behind which was the shed with the automatic piano.

"Do you often go to the *Guinguette à Deux Sous*?"

"Yes. We've been going there for nearly two years now. It was a discovery of James'. Before that, it was only frequented by bargees and the working-class people of Corbeil,

who used to dance there on Sundays. The sort of place James likes. He used to slink off there all by himself when he was fed up with the others. Then one day they found him there. And they started dancing, and somehow the place took on. So much so that we've pretty well bought the place up. Not many of the old customers go there now. . . ."

A waitress passed with a tray loaded with drinks. The splash of someone diving into the river. A smell of frying floated from the kitchen.

And there, at the bend of the river, a column of smoke rose from the chimney of the little white house. Maigret thought of Jean Lenoir! the little black moustache, the sharp teeth, the quivering nostrils. Jean Lenoir, who had tried to walk his feelings off by pacing up and down his cell. What was it he had said?

"*If only all the others came too. There are plenty that deserved it just as much as I do.*"

But the next morning he had been alone. Nobody had kept him company. Nobody from the *Guinguette à Deux Sous*. . . .

And in spite of the midday summer heat Maigret was conscious of a sudden chill, and it was with different eyes that he looked at this well-groomed hosier smoking a gold-tipped cigarette. Then he turned towards the boat which Basso was just bringing alongside. Its half-naked occupants jumped ashore and gaily greeted the others.

"May I introduce you?" said Feinstein. "I'm afraid I don't know your name. . . . . Monsieur . . .?"

"Maigret, *fonctionnaire*. . . ."

An official. He hadn't lied. The business was gone through quite ceremoniously. There were bows and murmurs of "*enchanté*" and "*tout le plaisir est pour moi.*"

"You were with us last night, weren't you? It went off

splendidly, don't you think so? Will you be joining in the bridge this afternoon?"

A thin young man plucked Monsieur Feinstein by the sleeve and drew him aside. A whispered conversation followed that was not lost on Maigret. The hosier's face clouded, then a frightened look came into it. Furtively, he eyed the inspector from head to foot. It cost him an effort to regain his composure.

The whole group had wandered over to the tables on the terrace.

"What are we having? . . . Pernods all round? Hallo! Where's James?"

In spite of the effort he was making, Monsieur Feinstein could not altogether hide his nervousness. He redoubled his attentions to Maigret.

"Is that all right for you? . . . A Pernod?"

"Anything you like. It's all the same to me."

"You're not . . .?" began Feinstein, but he thought better of it and broke off, staring hard at the other bank of the river as though something had attracted his attention. Then he tried again from another angle:

"It's odd you should have stumbled on Morsang. . . ."

"Yes, it's odd," Maigret agreed.

The drinks were served. Conversation struck up on all sides. Madame Feinstein's foot was touching Monsieur Basso's and her bright eyes were fixed on him almost continuously.

"A lovely day. But, of course, it spoils the fishing. The water's too clear. . . ."

The air was sultry and rather oppressive. Maigret's thoughts reverted to Lenoir's cell and the ray of sunshine striking high up on the wall. And Lenoir had walked and walked, as though to forget that he soon would walk no more.

Maigret's eye fell weightily on each in turn of the people sitting round him. On Monsieur Basso, the hosier, the builder, on young men and young women, and lastly on James, who at that moment came up to join them.

One after the other he tried to picture them by the Canal Saint-Martin, pitching a weighted body into the water.

"Your health!" said Monsieur Feinstein, with his most engaging smile.

Chapter III

BEHIND THE *GUINGUETTE*

MAIGRET had lunch on the terrace at a table by himself. But the others were all round him and the conversation was general. He had them pretty well placed by now. The bulk of them were shopkeepers, small manufacturers, and so on. The only ones not in business were an engineer and a doctor.

They were not rich, but comfortably off. All worked for their living, and the Saturday afternoon and Sunday were the most any of them had in the way of leisure.

Practically every family had a boat of some sort, and almost all were more or less enthusiastic about fishing. Twenty-four hours a week they would lay their work aside to wander about in flannels or *toile de Concarneau*, barefoot or in sandals.

Everything nautical was fashionable here, and some of them even simulated the rolling gait of old sea-dogs. Some of the younger people were single, but the majority were married couples. Between them reigned that almost exaggerated familiarity which prevails in a common gang.

James was the most popular. In fact, in his casual, easy-going way, he even seemed to hold the gang together. Whenever he showed his brick-red face and dreamy eyes, there would be good-humoured laughter and jocular back-chat.

"Here's James. How's things, James? Mouth like the bottom of a parrot-cage?"

"Never! If it's a bit sticky sometimes, it's soon cleaned up with a couple of Pernods. . . ."

The previous night's farce was the chief topic of conversation. The chap who'd been sick was teased unmercifully. So was another who had nearly fallen into the river.

Maigret was accepted as a member of the party. All the same, he didn't quite belong. The evening before, they had called him Uncle Arthur, while now they inspected him out of the corner of an eye. Not that he was left in the cold. Every now and again a phrase would be addressed to him out of politeness.

"Are you a fisherman too? . . ."

The Bassos were lunching at home. Indeed, all who had villas to go to had disappeared. It divided the gang into two sections: those who had villas, and those who stayed at the inn. The Feinsteins had a villa.

About two o'clock the hosier returned. He went straight up to Maigret, whom he seemed to have taken under his wing.

"We're playing bridge at the Bassos'. They're expecting you too."

"Do you always play at their house?"

"No. In fact, it should have been at ours today. But our maid's ill, so we cried off. . . . Are you coming, James?"

"Yes. But I think I'll sail. There's a bit of a breeze again now."

The Bassos' villa was less than three-quarters of a mile upstream. Maigret and Feinstein went on foot. Others sailed or rowed, and one or two got their cars out.

"A delightful fellow, Basso. Don't you think so?"

Once again Maigret couldn't decide whether the man was sneering or whether he meant it.

Really he was a strange man. Strange in that he was so difficult to classify. He had no dominant feature. He was neither old nor young, not good-looking, not ugly. Altogether an unknown quantity. His head might be destitute

of any trace of thought—or it might equally well be cram-full of dark secrets.

"I suppose you'll be coming every Sunday now?"

They passed groups of people who had been picnicking by the river, and every hundred yards or so a patient fisherman. In spite of a slight breeze, it seemed hotter than ever, so sultry as to be almost suffocating.

Wasps were buzzing round the flowers in the Bassos' garden. Three cars were drawn up in front of the house. The boy was playing in the water.

"You're a bridge-player, I believe," said the coal-merchant, shaking Maigret's hand cordially. "That's splendid. We can start in straight away without waiting for James. Heaven knows when he'll get here—trying to beat upstream on a day like this!"

The house was built and furnished in cottage style. Everything bright and clean as a new pin. Lots of windows, with red check curtains. Old Normandy furniture, and rustic pottery.

The card-table was in a sitting-room with a large bay window through which you could go straight into the garden. Bottles of *Vouvray* were standing in a silver ice-bucket whose surface was misty with condensation, and liqueurs had been put ready on a tray. Madame Basso, in her sailor clothes, looked after her guests.

"Will you have a liqueur? *Cognac, quetsch, mirabelle?* . . . Unless you'd rather have the *Vouvray*? . . ."

More introductions were necessary, as some of the Bassos' friends were not members of the gang.

"Monsieur . . . ?"

"Maigret."

"Monsieur Maigret. He plays bridge. So you've got a four. . . ."

The brightness and freshness of the place made it seem like a toy, or a scene in a musical comedy. There was nothing to remind one that life was a serious business. The boy was pushing off from the bank in a white-painted canoe, and his mother called out:

"Take care, Pierrot!"

"I'm only going to meet James."

"A cigar, Monsieur Maigret?" asked Basso. "Or, if you prefer a pipe, there's tobacco in the jar there. . . . Yes. Do by all means. My wife's used to it by now."

On the other side of the river stood the little white house—the *Guinguette à Deux Sous*.

The first part of the afternoon passed off uneventfully. Monsieur Basso didn't join in the bridge, but Maigret was able to notice that he seemed less at ease than in the morning. Was that because he was the host? He certainly didn't look the sort of man to be put off his stroke by a little thing like that. He was tall and heavily built, exuding vitality at every pore. Hale and hearty, a little coarse-grained, of plebeian fibre. . . .

Monsieur Feinstein took his bridge in earnest, and Maigret, who was his partner, earned more than one reproof.

Members of the Morsang gang were arriving all the time, and by four o'clock the house and garden were crowded. Someone put on the gramophone. Madame Basso handed round the *Vouvray*. Within a quarter of an hour there were half a dozen couples dancing round the bridge-players.

Monsieur Feinstein seemed completely absorbed in the game, and Maigret was surprised to hear him mutter:

"Hallo! Where's our friend Basso got to?"

"I think he went off in a boat," said someone.

Following the hosier's eyes, Maigret saw a boat which had just reached the opposite bank, near the *Guinguette à Deux Sous*. Monsieur Basso jumped ashore and went up to the

little inn. He soon reappeared, and in a short time had rejoined the party. He talked and laughed as heartily as ever, but Maigret couldn't help thinking he looked preoccupied.

Feinstein had already won two rubbers and looked like winning a third. His wife danced with Basso. James stood near the card-table, holding a glass of *Vouvray*.

"There are some that couldn't lose," he said, "even if they tried."

Was he jibing at the hosier? If he was, no one took any notice, and the hosier himself made no response. He was dealing, and Maigret noticed the steadiness and competence of his hands.

Another hour passed. The dancing was beginning to flag. Some of the guests had been bathing. James, who had taken Maigret's place at the bridge-table, had lost a rubber in quick time. He rose from his seat, saying:

"Time we had a change of scene. Who's for the *Guinguette à Deux Sous*?"

On his way out he noticed Maigret.

"Come along, you!"

He had reached the degree of intoxication which he never went beyond, no matter how much he drank. Others followed. A young man, using his hands as a megaphone, bawled out:

"Everybody to the *Guinguette*!"

"That's the way," said James, helping Maigret into his boat.

He pushed off, sending the boat shooting into the stream. Then he lolled back in the stern-sheets, with one hand on the tiller.

But there was hardly a breath of wind now, hardly enough to enable the boat to stem the stream, though the latter ran lazily enough.

"It doesn't matter. There's no hurry."

Maigret saw Marcel Basso and Feinstein cross in a motor-boat. They were on the other bank in no time, walking together up to the *Guinguette*.

Skiffs and dinghies followed. James had been the first to push off. Yet all the others had reached the other bank when he and Maigret were only half-way across. He might have used his oars, but didn't seem inclined to take the trouble.

"They're a good lot," he said, as though following some inward train of thought.

"Who?" asked Maigret, to draw him out.

"All of them. . . . They don't seem to know what to do with themselves. But that's not their fault, is it? Life's a boring business. . . ."

It sounded funny, because James, sprawling in the stern with the sun shining on his bald head, looked sublimely contented.

"Is it true you're a detective? . . ."

"Who told you so?"

"I don't know. But that's what they say. . . . Never mind. It's a trade, like any other."

A puff of wind filled the sail, and he gave a pull at the sheet. The clock at Morsang was striking six. Then the one at Seine-port answered. Except in one or two places, the other bank of the river was overgrown with reeds, teeming with insects.

"What do you think of . . .?" began James, but he was cut short by a sharp crack. At the same time, Maigret jumped to his feet, nearly overturning the boat.

"Look out!" shouted James, throwing his weight over to the other side to prevent the boat capsizing.

Then he seized one of the oars, put it over the stern and started sculling. His forehead was puckered and his eyes looked anxious.

"What could it be? . . . There's no shooting this month. . . ."

"It came from behind the *Guinguette*," said Maigret.

They were close to the bank now and could hear the automatic piano. Then a terror-stricken voice screaming:

"Stop it! . . . Stop the music!"

Someone dashed through the dancers, and a moment later the music stopped abruptly. One couple, oblivious of the alarm, danced the whole length of the shed before breaking off. The old grandmother came out of the house carrying a pail. She stood still, listening, wondering what was the matter.

The reeds made landing difficult. Maigret was in such a hurry that he sank up to the knee in the muddy water. James alighted with more dexterity, and shambled after him, muttering to himself.

There was no need to ask the way. Everybody was trooping round to the back of the shed.

A man was standing there, looking at the others with large troubled eyes, repeating over and over again:

"It wasn't me. . . ."

The man was Basso. He hardly seemed conscious of what he was holding in his hand—a small revolver inlaid with mother-of-pearl.

"Where's my wife?" he asked, looking at those who stood round him as though he did not know them.

Heads were turned, looking for her. Then someone said:

"She stayed behind, to see to the dinner."

Maigret had to thread his way through to the front before catching sight of the figure that was lying in the tall grass, the figure of a man in a grey flannel suit, with a straw hat fallen on the ground beside him.

There was nothing tragic about it. On the contrary, it was all rather ridiculous. Nobody had the faintest idea what to do. All they did was to stand gaping at Basso, who gaped

wildly back at them. What made it still more absurd was that the doctor was standing quite near the body, and he seemed just as nonplussed as anybody. One might have thought he was waiting for instructions before daring to intervene.

Then the body moved. And suddenly the atmosphere changed, became tragic after all. A leg twitched. The shoulders squirmed. An effort—a desperate effort—then the body fell back limply on to the grass.

Monsieur Feinstein was dead.

* * * *

"Feel his heart," said Maigret curtly to the doctor.

He was familiar with scenes of this sort, and his keyed-up senses missed no detail. His eye took in the whole scene with a sharpness of focus that made it almost unnatural.

In the last ranks of the spectators, someone had sunk to the ground, wailing piteously. It was Madame Feinstein, who had been the last to arrive, having been the last to stop dancing. Others were bending over her. The innkeeper appeared with the mistrustful, almost hostile look of a typical peasant.

Monsieur Basso was panting. His breast heaved. Suddenly, looking down, he noticed the revolver he was holding. At the sight of it he seemed more bewildered than ever. Once more he looked wildly at the people gathered round him, as though imploring one of them to be kind enough to take it from him. Or was he still looking for his wife? For the tenth time he repeated:

"It wasn't me."

"Dead," said the doctor, raising his head.

"A bullet?"

"It went in here."

And he pointed to a gap between the ribs.

"Is there a telephone here?"

"No," answered the landlord. "You have to go to the station or up to the lock."

Marcel Basso was in white flannels, and his open shirt made the most of his beefy chest. But his massive build was of no use to him now. He swayed slightly from side to side, stretched out a hand as though groping for support, then abruptly sat down on the grass, barely three yards from the corpse, and took his head between his hands.

"Poor man! He's crying!"

It was a little, high-pitched voice which piped up, somewhere in the rear. It was intended to be in an undertone, and the girl blushed scarlet as heads were turned in her direction.

"Have you got a bicycle?" Maigret asked the landlord.

"Of course."

"Then go to the lock as quick as you can. Tell the lock-keeper to ring up the *gendarmerie*. . . ."

"At Corbeil or Cesson?"

"Whichever he likes."

Maigret looked rather put out as he studied Basso, then picked up the little revolver that lay in the grass. One cartridge had been fired.

A lady's revolver, pretty as a piece of jewelry. Tiny nickel-plated bullets. They didn't look serious at all. Yet one of them had been enough to snap the thread of a human life.

There was no blood to speak of. Just a little rusty-red spot on the grey flannel jacket, apart from which the hosier looked as spick and span as ever.

"We've taken Mado indoors," said a young man, rejoining the group. "She's in an awful state."

Mado was Madame Feinstein. She was at that moment lying on the innkeeper's high, old-fashioned, wooden bed

Everybody stared at Maigret, except those at whom he looked, who turned their eyes hurriedly away.

"Cooey! . . . Where are you all?"

The words, coming from the river-bank, cast a sudden chill. It was Pierrot, who had just arrived in his canoe to join them.

"Go quickly. . . . Go and stop him. . . ."

Monsieur Basso was recovering his self-control. He raised his head, ashamed of his momentary weakness. Once again he looked from face to face as though seeking someone who could help him.

"I belong to the *Police Judiciaire*," said Maigret.

"You know. . . . It wasn't me. . ."

"I'd like to have a word with you, if you'll come this way."

Then, turning to the doctor, the inspector went on:

"I count on you to see that nobody touches the body, or comes near it at all."

It was all rather flat, like a rehearsal in everyday clothes. There was no drama in this glowing, sultry air, with anglers passing to and fro along the towing-path, their creels slung across their backs. Maigret and Basso walked off side by side.

"It's incredible. . . ."

There was no spring left in Basso's stride. As soon as they turned the corner of the shed they could see the river, the villa standing on the other bank, and Madame Basso rearranging the wicker chairs that were lying about all over the garden.

Seeing his father, the boy called out:

"*Maman* sent me over to get the key of the cellar. . . ."

Monsieur Basso was unable to answer. His eyes changed to those of a hunted beast.

"Tell him where the key is."

With an immense effort Basso just managed to call out:

"It's hanging on the latch of the garage."

"What?"

So he had to say it over again :

"On the latch of the garage."

A faint echo came back to them :

". . . rage."

They went in under the lean-to and stood by the automatic piano.

"What happened between you ?"

"I don't know. . . ."

"Whose is this revolver ?"

"It's not mine. I always keep mine in the car."

"Did Feinstein attack you ?"

A long sigh, followed by a long silence. Then :

"I don't know. . . . I didn't do anything. I swear I didn't kill him."

"But you had the revolver in your hand when . . ."

"Yes. . . . But I really don't know how it happened."

"Do you mean to say someone else shot him ?"

"No . . . I . . . You've no idea how awful it is."

"Or did Feinstein shoot himself ?"

"He . . ."

Monsieur Basso sat down on one of the benches and took his head between his hands. There were several glasses on the table, one of them no more than half-empty. He seized it, and with a grimace gulped down its contents.

"What's going to happen now ? Are you arresting me ?"

Wrinkling his forehead, he stared intently at Maigret and then went on :

"But . . . How is it you happened to be here ? . . . You couldn't possibly have known . . ."

To judge by his distorted features, he was making a supreme effort to understand something, or rather to piece together a number of discordant scraps of thought.

"It almost looks . . . almost like a trap, which . . ."

The white canoe had crossed to the other side and was now returning.

"Papa! The key isn't there. *Maman says* . . ."

Mechanically Basso patted his pockets, from one of which came a metallic sound. He took out a bunch of keys, putting them on the table, and it was Maigret who walked over to the towing-path and called out to the boy:

"Here! Catch!"

"*Merci, monsieur.*"

And once again the canoe shot over towards the other bank, where Madame Basso and a maid were laying the garden tables for dinner. Downstream, at the *Vieux Garçon*, boats were tying up for the night. The proprietor of the *Guinguette à Deux Sous* came pedalling back from the lock, where he'd been to telephone.

"You're sure it wasn't you who pulled the trigger?"

No answer. Basso merely shrugged his shoulders and heaved another sigh.

Pierrot had jumped ashore and run up to his mother. They talked together for a moment or two; then an order was given to the servant, who went into the house, returning almost immediately holding something in her hand.

She handed it to her mistress. Field-glasses. Madame Basso trained them on the *Guinguette*, and gazed through them for a long time.

Meanwhile James was in the kitchen with the people of the inn, filling up glass after glass of cognac as he thoughtfully stroked the cat that was coiled up in his lap.

Chapter IV

THE MEETINGS AT THE *TAVERNE ROYALE*

It was a horrid week, filled with tiresome little jobs with nothing to show for them, time wasted, irksome enquiries. And all in a stuffy, sun-baked Paris, whose streets were turned into rivers by a thunderstorm which drenched the town about six each evening.

Madame Maigret was still away, writing . . . *the weather is magnificent, and I've never seen such a crop of sloes as we shall have this year. . . .*

Maigret hated Paris when his wife was not there. He ate without appetite at the first restaurant that came to hand, and he had even been known to spend the night at a hotel to avoid going home.

The case had begun with a flat-brimmed top-hat in a shop in the Boulevard Saint-Martin. Then a clandestine rendezvous and a flying visit to the Avenue Niel. A farcical "wedding" at the *Guinguette à Deux Sous*; a few rubbers of bridge; and lastly the unexpected calamity.

When the *gendarmes* had arrived on the scene, Maigret had left it all to them, since he wasn't there officially. They had promptly arrested the coal-merchant, and reported the case to the examining magistrate.

An hour later, Marcel Basso was sitting between two sergeants in the little station at Seineport. A record Sunday crowd was gathering to catch the train. One of the sergeants offered him a cigarette.

The lamps had all been lit, and there was only a smudge of twilight in the west. The train was just coming into the station, and everybody was bracing himself to fight for a seat, when suddenly Basso, without the faintest warning, broke away from his escort, dived through the crowd, dashed across the line in front of the engine, and made for the woods that were only just on the other side.

The *gendarmes* were taken completely unawares. Ten seconds before, he had been sitting between them, quiet as a lamb and apparently completely overcome by the sudden disaster that had overtaken him.

Maigret only heard of it after his return to Paris the same evening. It was an unpleasant night for everybody. All round Morsang and Seineport, *gendarmes* were combing the countryside, keeping a watch on stations, and stopping every car on the road. The net was spread over practically the whole of the department, and Parisians returning from their Sunday outing were astonished at the number of police on duty at the gates of Paris.

Two men of the *Police Judiciaire* were stationed at the Bassos' house on the Quai d'Austerlitz, and another two at their villa on the Seine. Lastly, two were covering the Feinsteins' flat in the Boulevard des Batignolles.

On Monday morning the examining magistrate and a host of experts proceeded to the *Guinguette à Deux Sous*. Maigret had to attend. There were interminable discussions.

That night there was still no sign of Basso. And it seemed practically certain that he'd slipped through the net. He might be hiding in Paris or one of the outlying towns—Melun or Fontainebleau, for example—though he might easily have gone further afield.

On Tuesday morning the police pathologist presented his report. The shot had been fired at a distance of about a foot.

There was nothing to show whether it had been fired by Feinstein himself or by Basso.

Visit to the Feinsteins' flat. A commonplace interior, without luxury, and none too clean. They kept a servant, but the Feinsteins were obviously people in a small way.

Questioned about the revolver, Madame Feinstein said it was hers. She had no idea her husband had taken it. She had always kept it in her own room. It was always loaded.

And Madame Feinstein wept and wept, ever more copiously. It was difficult to get any other response out of her except the phrase "If only I'd known . . ." which she volunteered incessantly.

She had been Basso's mistress for the past two months. She was in love with him.

"But you had others before him?"

"Monsieur!"

She certainly had, whatever she might say about it. *Une femme à tempérament*, who was not likely to be satisfied by any husband.

"How long have you been married?"

"Eight years."

"Did your husband know of your *affaire* with Basso?"

"Good gracious, no."

"But he might have had suspicions?"

"Never."

"Supposing he had, do you think he might have been capable of threatening to shoot Basso?"

"I don't know. . . . He was a strange man, very reserved."

Certainly a household where there was no intimacy. Feinstein buried in his own affairs. Mado rushing round the shops and carrying on with other men.

It was a gloomy Maigret who conducted the case, wearily following in the traditional rut, questioning the *concierge* at the

Boulevard des Batignolles, the manager of Feinstein's shop, the Bassos' servants, anybody, in fact, who had anything to do with either household.

The case didn't taste nice. A musty taste of commonplace existence, with a remote undercurrent of something a bit crooked.

Feinstein had started with a very small shop in the Avenue de Clichy. Then, a year after his marriage, he had taken over a going concern in the Boulevard des Capucines.

The deal had been financed largely by an advance from his bank, and from then on it had been the same story as with nine out of ten businesses that have no solid backing. Creditors pressing all the time, wholesalers threatening to cut off supplies unless their claims were met. An anxious passage at the end of every month, when payments fell due.

Nothing dishonest. But nothing solid either.

At home it was the same; the local tradesmen constantly clamouring for their bills to be paid.

In the little office behind the shop, Maigret pored for a good two hours over the books. Search as he might, however, he could find no dealings that were in the least remarkable six years before. That was the time Lenoir had referred to when he'd talked to Maigret on the eve of his execution.

A dull case and a discouraging one. Nothing to get hold of. A blank drawn at every turn.

Maigret rather dreaded the inevitable visit to Madame Basso, who had remained in the country. But her attitude astonished him. She certainly suffered, but she was far from being overcome. Altogether, she showed a dignity that was quite unexpected.

"My husband must have had good reasons to break away from the police."

"Flight is generally taken as a sign of guilt."

"I'm confident of his innocence."
"Have you heard from him?"
"Not a word."
"How much money had he on him?"
"Not more than a hundred francs."

Basso's affairs were in a very different state to Feinstein's. The offices on the Quai d'Austerlitz showed every sign of prosperity. In good years and bad, the business had never brought in less than five hundred thousand francs. The three barges alongside the yard were his own. It had been a substantial business in his father's time, and Marcel Basso had considerably extended it.

Nor did the weather help to improve Maigret's temper. Like most stoutly built people, he suffered from the heat, and up to three o'clock each afternoon the sun beat mercilessly straight down into the breathless streets.

Even when the sun moved westwards it hardly improved matters, and relief only came with the evening storm. And what a relief! The sky would blacken. A sudden gust of wind would fill your mouth with grit. Then claps of thunder, and the deluge would begin. Huge drops splashing on the asphalt, torrents coursing along the gutter.

Everyone took shelter in doorways or under awnings—and some of the awnings made a poor show of doing their job.

It was on the Wednesday that Maigret, caught in the storm, made a dash for the terrace of the *Taverne Royale*. A man rose from his seat, holding out his hand. It was James, at a table by himself, with a Pernod in front of him.

It was the first time the inspector had seen him in town clothes. They made him look much more ordinary, but, even so, there was something about him which differentiated him from the average bank clerk, and which in some queer way made you think of a circus.

"Have a drink?"

Maigret was tired out. Heaven knows how long the rain would last, and after that he had to go back again to the Quai des Orfèvres to see if anything fresh had come through.

"A Pernod?"

In the ordinary way, he confined himself to beer. This time, however, he didn't protest. Still plunged in gloom, he sipped at the imitation absinthe. All the same, James was not an uncongenial companion. Indeed, there was one thing about him that was a priceless blessing; he wasn't a chatterbox.

He just sat back serenely in his wicker chair, smoking cigarettes and watching the few people who ventured out into the rain.

When a newspaper boy came by with an evening paper, he beckoned him. After a cursory look, he handed it to Maigret, pointing to a small paragraph:

Marcel Basso, the murderer of the hosier of the Boulevard des Capucines, is still at large in spite of the intensive efforts of the Paris police and the country gendarmerie to locate his whereabouts.

"And what do you think about it?"

James shrugged his shoulders, and the vague movement of his hand might be taken to mean he didn't very much care.

"Do you think he might have left the country?"

"I don't suppose he's very far. Probably wandering about in Paris."

"Why do you say that?"

"I don't know. All I know is, that if he fled it was most likely for some special reason. . . . Waiter! Two Pernods."

They were potent, and Maigret drank three. Little by little he slipped into a condition that was rare to him. Not that he was drunk—but everything became a bit softened, a bit blurred.

An agreeable condition. His whole being relaxed. He found it nice to sit there with James on the terrace of the *Taverne Royale*, watching the heavy straight rain. His mind lazily turned over the case he was working on, and it was the first time he thought of it—yes, actually with a touch of pleasure.

A desultory conversation, yet one which never seemed to flag. They touched on one topic, then on another, with long silences in between. Sharp at eight, James stood up, saying:

"Time to go. My wife will be waiting for me."

When Maigret walked off, his ill-humour returned. He was annoyed with himself for having wasted two hours, and his head was rather heavy with the Pernods.

He dined at the first likely-looking restaurant, and then returned to his office. No news of any sort. Not the faintest trace of the missing man.

And the next day he went on with the job, with the same sullen obstinacy.

For the most part it consisted in wading through old files, dating five, six, or seven years back. No result. Nothing which appeared to have the remotest bearing on the story Jean Lenoir had told.

Was it any good trying to find the Victor the latter had mentioned—his tuberculous fellow-blackmailer? Maigret tried, ringing up one sanatorium after another.

Plenty of Victors. Too many! But never the right one.

By lunch-time Maigret had a headache and wasn't feeling like food at all. He went, nevertheless, to the restaurant in the Place Dauphine, whose customers were mostly drawn from police headquarters.

In the afternoon he rang through to the detectives who were covering the Bassos' villa by the Seine. They had nothing to

report. Nobody had been seen coming or going except the local tradespeople. Madame Basso had been seen in the garden with her son. She took in a lot of newspapers, but otherwise there was nothing unusual about the household.

At five o'clock Maigret was leaving the block of bachelor apartments in the Avenue Niel, where he'd been on the off-chance of gleaning some further information about Basso or Mado. Once again; results nil.

And without any set intention, more as if it was an old-established habit, Maigret drifted toward the *Taverne Royale*, shook the hand that was held out to him, and took his seat on the terrace by James' side.

"Any news?" asked the latter.

And then to the waiter:

"Two Pernods, please."

The thunderstorm was late today, and they sat gazing out on to a street flooded with sunshine. Cars drove past, many of them driven by foreigners.

"The line the papers are taking," muttered Maigret, as though speaking more to himself than his neighbour, "the line the papers are taking is that for some reason or other Feinstein attacked Basso, who snatched the revolver out of Feinstein's hand and shot him."

"Which, of course, is quite absurd."

Maigret looked at James, who also seemed to be soliloquizing.

"Why should it be absurd?"

"Because if Feinstein had wanted to shoot Basso he'd have done it. Didn't you see the way he played bridge? Not the man to bungle anything."

Maigret couldn't help smiling: James said it so seriously.

"So in your opinion . . .?"

"Oh no! I've no opinion at all, except that Basso had

no need to go messing about with Mado. . . . On the other hand, she's not the woman to let a man slip through her fingers."

"Was her husband jealous?"

"Feinstein?"

And as James shot a glance at the inspector there was an ironical twinkle in his eye. Then, with a shrug of his shoulders, he went on:

"It's no business of mine. But if he had been jealous, most of the male members of the gang would have been dead and buried long ago."

"So they all . . .?"

"Not quite all. No need to exaggerate. But if you once got dancing with Mado it didn't stop at that."

"You too?"

"I don't dance."

"But a woman can't carry on like that without her husband finding out sooner or later."

It was with a sigh that James answered:

"Perhaps. But Feinstein owed money to them all."

Maigret whistled.

"So that's it!"

"*Deux Pernods. . . . Deux.*"

He was a queer fish, this James. You might sum him up at sight, putting him down merely as an ass and an alcoholic. But you'd be wrong! There was more in him—a lot more—than met the eye.

"Yes. And I don't for a moment suppose Mado knew a thing about it. Feinstein had only to saunter up to her latest flame and ask for the loan of a few hundred francs. No need to be heavy-handed about it. A meaning look and a little pressure to fork out. It wouldn't be so easy to refuse."

The thunderstorm still held off. The conversation lapsed,

and Maigret, sipping his Pernods, stared vacantly into the street at the crowd that flowed by. He was comfortable in his wicker chair as he lazily ruminated what James had told him.

"Eight o'clock. I must be going."

James shook hands and strolled off just as the first big drops of rain were falling.

By Friday, it really was an established habit, and Maigret went to the *Taverne Royale* as a simple matter of routine. In the course of a rambling conversation he couldn't help saying:

"So you never go straight home from the bank? From five to eight you . . ."

The Englishman sighed.

"One must have some place one can call one's own."

A place to call one's own! The terrace of a café. A wicker chair, a marble table, and on it an opalescent green drink. For horizon, the columns of the Madeleine, the ceaseless flow of cars and pedestrians, and the bustling to and fro of the white-aproned waiters.

"How long have you been married?"

"Eight years."

Maigret didn't dare ask him if he loved his wife. In any case, he felt sure he'd say yes. Only, if it was yes, it was after eight o'clock, after three hours of a place he could call his own.

Wasn't it something like intimacy that was springing up between these two men?

That day they didn't even refer to the case. Maigret drank his three Pernods, only too glad to forget all about his work. Two inspectors were away, and he had to keep an eye on their jobs as well as his own. And there wasn't a single interesting one among them—nothing but rather tiresome details. To make matters worse, the examining magistrate who was handling the *Guinguette* case never gave him a moment's peace.

Only that day he had sent him to interview Mado for the second time. Everything, in fact, had to be done twice over. For the second time he had gone through the hosier's books, and at Basso's office he had asked all the questions he had asked before.

Being short-handed at the *Police Judiciaire*, they hadn't enough men to cover all the places where they thought Basso might turn up. That didn't improve matters either, and the director of the *Police Judiciaire* was in as bad a mood as Maigret.

"About time you got hold of something!" he'd said that morning.

Maigret agreed with James. He too felt that Basso must be in Paris. But how could he have provided himself with money? Or, if he hadn't any, how did he live? What was he hoping for, or waiting for? Was he hiding for some special reason, as James had suggested?

The case against him would have been by no means damning. With a tip-top lawyer he'd have stood an excellent chance of getting clean off, or at any rate of being let off lightly. A short term of imprisonment perhaps, after which he'd return to his fireside and his fortune.

Instead of that, he'd bunked and spoilt everything.

It certainly looked as though he must have special reasons.

* * * *

Saturday brought a firmly worded telegram from Madame Maigret:

Counting on your coming this week-end without fail love.

Maigret hesitated, then let the afternoon trains slip by, intending to take the night one. Soon after five he was in his usual place by James' side, while a couple of Pernods stood on the table in front of them.

As on the previous Saturday, there was a general exodus from Paris. People hurrying towards the Gare Saint-Lazare. Taxis piled high with luggage.

"Are you going to Morsang?" asked Maigret.

"Same as usual."

"It'll seem queer without Basso, won't it?"

The inspector was dying to go too. On the other hand, he wanted to see his wife, spend a few hours' trout-fishing in the streams of Alsace, and sniff the good country-house smell he always associated with his sister-in-law's.

He turned it over in his mind. The pros and cons were pretty well balanced. James got up and went inside the café.

There was nothing remarkable about that, and Maigret took no particular notice of either his departure or his return a few moments later.

Some minutes passed, five, perhaps ten. Then a waiter came up.

"Is either of you gentlemen Monsieur Maigret?"

"I am. What is it?"

"A telephone call for you, monsieur."

Maigret went indoors and crossed the large room to where the telephone box was situated. He was frowning. For, in spite of the heat and the Pernods, he had his wits about him. And there was something fishy about this telephone call.

Before going into the box, he turned round towards the terrace. James was watching him.

"That's funny!" he muttered as he picked up the receiver. "Hallo! Maigret speaking. . . . Hallo! Who is it? . . . Hallo!"

He was fuming with impatience by the time a girl's voice answered:

"What number are you wanting?"

"Who's that?"

"Operator. What number are you wanting?"

"But you rang me up, mademoiselle."

"You haven't been rung up from here. I've had no call for you in the last ten minutes."

In a flash Maigret had banged down the receiver, kicked open the door, and rushed back into the café. On the terrace, under the shadow of the awning, a man was standing talking to James. It was Marcel Basso, looking quite unlike himself in a mean suit of ready-made clothes that didn't fit him. His anxious eyes peered in towards the telephone box.

He saw Maigret at the same moment the latter saw him. His lips moved—a hasty sentence—and he had darted back into the crowded street.

"How many calls did you have?" asked the manageress at the cash desk.

But Maigret was outside before she had finished her sentence. The terrace was crowded. A waiter with a tray of drinks was blocking the way. By the time the inspector was on the pavement it was impossible to tell which way Basso had made off. Buses were going in both directions. Had he jumped on to one? Or into a taxi? There were dozens about.

With a scowl, Maigret returned to his seat. Without a word or a glance at James, he sat down. A waiter approached.

"The manageress told me to ask how many calls you had."

"*Zut!*"

Somehow Maigret knew James was grinning, and he rounded on him.

"I congratulate you!"

James inclined his head.

"How long did it take you and Basso to work out that little scheme?"

"All done on the spur of the moment. Two Pernods, waiter. And some cigarettes."

"What was he saying? What did he want?"

James leaned back in his chair and heaved a sigh, like a man who finds further conversation futile.

"Was it money? And where on earth did he get hold of that suit?"

"You'd hardly expect him to be walking about the streets of Paris in white flannels, would you?"

It was in white flannels that Basso had escaped. James forgot nothing.

"Is this the first time that you've got in touch with him?"

"That he's got in touch with me."

"And you've made up your mind not to talk."

"You'd do just the same, wouldn't you? I've been his guest a hundred times. I've nothing whatever against him."

"Was he wanting money?"

"He'd been watching us for half an hour. Yesterday I thought I saw him hovering about on the opposite pavement. But of course, with you sitting there, he didn't dare come across."

"So today you arranged for me to be called to the telephone?"

"He looked so tired."

"Did he have time to tell you anything?"

"Extraordinary how a suit of clothes can change a man!" sighed James, evading the question.

Maigret looked at him out of the corner of his eye.

"I suppose you know that by rights I could arrest you as an accomplice?"

"There are so many things that can be done by rights. To say nothing of the fact that rights aren't always so right as all that."

He spoke with the utmost simplicity.

"Waiter!" he called out, changing the subject. "Are those Pernods coming?"

"They won't be a moment."

"Are you going to join us again this week-end? The thing is that, with two to share it, it's well worth while taking a taxi. It's only a hundred francs or so, while by train . . ."

"And your wife?"

"Oh, she always takes a taxi. She shares one with her sister and two or three friends. With five of them, it works out at twenty francs a head."

"I see."

"You're not coming?"

"Yes. I'm coming. . . . Waiter! The bill, please."

"We'll each pay for our own, as usual."

They always did. So Maigret paid for his three, while James gave the waiter ten francs extra for the telephone job.

In the taxi he sat silent and preoccupied. It was not till they were passing Villejuif that he finally got it off his chest.

"I'm wondering where we'd better play bridge tomorrow."

It was time for the thunderstorm. The first big raindrops streaked the windows diagonally.

Chapter V

THE DOCTOR'S CAR

ONE might reasonably have expected to find a changed atmosphere at Morsang. A week isn't long to live down such events as had occurred the previous Sunday. One of the gang was dead, another fleeing for his life.

Yet when Maigret and James arrived, the crowd they found gathered round a car was just the same as ever. All were in sporting rig save the doctor, who had not yet discarded his lounge-suit. It was his car they were standing round, a brand-new one that he had driven for the first time that day. They were asking questions about it, while he only too willingly expounded its merits.

"How many miles to the gallon did you say?"

Nearly all had cars of their own.

"Listen to the engine! You can hardly hear it ticking over."

The doctor's wife remained sitting in the car. She was enjoying the moment to the full. Her husband, Dr. Mertens, was about thirty. He was thin and unhealthy-looking, as dainty in his movements as a girl.

"Hallo!" said James, barging through the crowd. "Got a new bus?"

With his loose-limbed stride, he walked right round it, eyeing it critically and muttering to himself. Then out loud:

"I'll have to try it out tomorrow morning! You don't mind, do you?"

How were they going to take Maigret's presence this time?

To all appearances, they didn't even notice he was there!

"Is your wife coming, James?"

"Yes, she'll be here presently. She's coming with Lili and the others."

Canoes were brought out of the garage and carried down to the water. Somebody was mending a fishing-rod with silk cord. Up to dinner-time, the gang was dispersed in various occupations, and during the meal there was not much general conversation, though now and again a few remarks would pass from table to table.

"Is Madame Basso here?"

"She's been here all the week. A rotten week it must have been for her!"

"What are we doing tomorrow?"

It wasn't long, however, before Maigret was made to feel that they could have done very well without him. No one openly avoided him, yet, unless James was with him, he found himself almost invariably alone, sitting on the terrace or wandering along the bank of the river. When night fell, he slipped away and went to see the men who were posted at the Bassos' villa. There were two of them, keeping watch and watch throughout the twenty-four hours. They slept and had their meals in a little inn at Seineport.

"Anything doing?"

"Nothing whatever. *She* doesn't seem up to any tricks. We see her every day in the garden. The tradesmen come as usual; the baker at nine, the butcher a little later. Then a man comes round with vegetables about eleven. The milk's brought by a girl from a farm."

One of the ground-floor rooms was lit. They were apparently having supper late that day, for, through the thin check curtains, it was just possible to make out the boy, sitting with a napkin tied at the back of his neck.

The detective was keeping his watch in a little wood by the river-side.

"You know, it's simply swarming with rabbits here," he said regretfully. "If it wasn't for the job we could have a fine time."

On the opposite bank, the *Guinguette à Deux Sous*, where two couples were dancing. No doubt workmen from Corbeil with their girls.

* * * *

The Sunday morning was like any other at Morsang, with fishermen stationed at intervals all along the river-banks or sitting motionless in their green-painted boats moored head and stern in the stream.

A sailing-boat would pass every few minutes.

It all seemed so tranquil, so orderly, as though nothing untoward could ever happen to disturb it.

A pretty picture under a pure sky. Townsfolk peacefully enjoying a few hours' escape from city life. Was it a little too pretty, a little too peaceful? Perhaps. Something a little sickly about it, like an over-sweetened dish.

Maigret found James in a blue-and-white striped jersey, white trousers, and sandals, and an American sailor cap. For breakfast he was sipping a large glass of brandy-and-water.

"Slept well? *Tu as bien dormi?*"

He never said *tu* to Maigret when they were in Paris, but used the less intimate *vous*. But here he said *tu* to everybody, the inspector included. It would have been odd with anybody else, but not with James, who didn't even seem conscious of it.

"What are you doing this morning?" he went on.

"I think I'll trot round to the *Guinguette*."

"We'll all be there later on. We're having a drink there before lunch. Do you want a boat?"

"I think I'll walk, thanks."

Oh no! He was given a pogo-stick, which was the latest craze. He had never been on one before, and had a job to keep his balance. He was the only one in town clothes. When he reached the *Guinguette* it was only ten o'clock, and there wasn't a customer in the place.

At least so he thought, till he found a man in the kitchen eating a huge chunk of bread and a bit of sausage. The old grandmother was just saying to him:

"You must take care of yourself. I had a boy myself who refused to take any notice of it, and it made short work of him, though he was a big strong fellow—twice what you are."

Even as she spoke, the customer, with his mouth full, was seized by a fit of coughing. In the middle of it he caught sight of Maigret standing in the doorway. He frowned.

"Give me a bottle of beer, will you?" said the inspector.

"Wouldn't you be more comfortable outside? On a fine day like this. . . ."

No. He preferred to stay in the kitchen, with its deal table covered with knife-marks, its rush-seated chairs, and the huge pot that simmered on the hot-plate.

"My son's over at Corbeil seeing about some soda-water. They promised to send it over yesterday. . . . So if you wouldn't mind helping me to lift the trap-door . . .?"

A large trap-door in the middle of the kitchen floor, through which came a raw, damp breath from the cellar. The bent old woman disappeared below, while the man went on eating, with his eyes fixed on the detective.

He was a young fellow of about twenty-five, pale and thin. He was fair; he hadn't shaved for some days; his eyes were very sunken, and his lips colourless.

What was most striking about him, however, was the way

he was dressed and his whole attitude. He wasn't in rags; nor had he either the aloofness of the tramp or the insolence of the professional beggar.

He was a mixture, a mixture of shyness and self-assertiveness. He was at the same time humble and aggressive. One might almost say he was both clean and dirty. His clothes were really not bad at all, yet they must have been dragging along the road for weeks.

"Your papers!"

There was no need for Maigret to add:

"Police!"

For the fellow had understood right from the start. From his pocket he drew a filthy identity-card. Maigret read the name half-audibly:

"Victor Gaillard."

He quietly folded up the card again and returned it to its owner. The old woman emerged from the cellar and lowered the trap-door.

"There you are," she said, opening the bottle; "you'll find that nice and cold."

Then she went back to the potatoes she had been peeling, while the two men quietly, almost casually, started their conversation.

"Last address?"

"The Municipal Sanatorium at Gien."

"When did you leave?"

"A month ago."

"Since when?"

"I've been broke. Wandering along.... You could pinch me for vagrancy, but they'd only have to put me back in a *sana*. I've only one lung left."

He wasn't pitiful about it at all. Oh no! Much more like a man presenting his credentials.

"You got a letter from Lenoir, didn't you?"

"What Lenoir?"

"You can chuck that! He told you you'd find your bloke at the *Guinguette à Deux Sous*."

"I'd had enough of the *sana*."

"And had rosy visions of living at the expense of the friend you picked up by the Canal Saint-Martin. . . ."

The old woman listened uncomprehendingly, but without astonishment. It all sounded so natural. There was nothing to show that two men were fencing for all they were worth. A hen wandered in, pickering about under the table.

"What do you say to that?"

"I don't know what you mean."

"Lenoir talked."

"I don't know any Lenoir."

Maigret shrugged his shoulders, lit his pipe, and once more said:

"You can chuck that! You know as well as I do that I'll catch you at the first bend in the road."

"They can't do anything worse than a *sana*."

"I know. We've already heard about your one lung."

Two boats rowed past, followed by a canoe.

"Lenoir wasn't having you on. The chap's coming all right."

"It's no use. You won't get anything out of me."

"So much the worse for you. I'll give you till this evening. If you haven't come up to scratch by then I'll gaol you for vagrancy. . . . After that, we'll see."

Maigret looked into his eyes, reading what was there as easily as a book. A type of man he knew all too well.

What a difference between him and Lenoir! They might have belonged to different races. Victor was essentially a hanger-on, the sort that is employed to watch for the police

while others do the job, the sort that gets the smallest share in the pickings. The sort that is easily led into bad ways, and has neither the character to make good nor to become a real crook. He had started at an early age hanging round doubtful places. With Lenoir he had had a stroke of luck, and for a time had probably lived quite well on the canal business.

Without his lung trouble, he would probably have been to the end on the outskirts of Lenoir's gang, being given an odd job from time to time. Instead, he had been sent to a sanatorium, where he was no doubt a thorn in the flesh of nurses and doctors alike, breaking rules, pinching things, making mischief. It wasn't hard to guess that he'd gone from punishment to punishment, from sanatorium to sanatorium, to finish up in some special home for delinquents that had been only too glad to see the last of him.

He wasn't frightened. For he always had that door of escape—his one lung. Obviously he was going to live on his lung trouble till the day he died of it. And Maigret was threatening to clap him in gaol!

"Do you think I care?"

"So you refuse to tell me who he is?"

"Who?"

"The canal fellow."

"Don't know who you mean."

Yet his eyes twinkled as he spoke, and he picked up his hunk of bread and sausage, stuffed his mouth full, and masticated with obvious pleasure.

"Besides," he muttered, after swallowing at last, "Lenoir never blabbed. He wasn't the chap to."

Maigret did not allow himself to be irritated. He'd got hold of the right end of the stick, or at least he'd got hold of something. It made the whole case look different now.

"I could do with another bottle, *grand'mère*."

"I thought you might. I brought up three."

She looked with curiosity at Victor. She couldn't have failed to get the hang of their conversation, and she wondered what crime he could have committed.

"To think you were being taken care of in a *sana*—and you must needs go and leave. Just like my boy. He was just the same. Couldn't bear to be cooped up, as he used to say."

Maigret watched the boats passing in the blazing sun outside. The gang would soon be coming for their drink before lunch. The first to arrive were James' wife and two friends. As their boat came alongside, they waved to some others who were close behind. Still more were following.

Catching sight of them, the old woman sighed.

"There! And my son's not yet back from Corbeil. I'll never be able to manage all alone."

"What about your daughter?"

"She's gone for the milk."

All the same, she collected some glasses and carried them outside, placing them on the tables in the garden. Then she fumbled in a pocket of her petticoat.

"They'll be wanting some coppers for the piano."

Maigret remained where he was, watching the gang arrive with one eye while keeping the other on his chesty acquaintance, who went on eating undismayed. And now and again his glance would fall on the Bassos' villa, with its garden full of flowers, the two boats moored up, the swing that hung from the branch of a tree.

He started, thinking he heard a shot in the distance. Others too seemed to have heard something. Heads were raised. People stood listening. But there was nothing to see, and for quite ten minutes nothing further happened. The crowd that

had come over from the *Vieux Garçon* took their seats at the tables. The old woman sallied forth with an armful of bottles.

Then a dark figure appeared at the Bassos' lawn, stopped for a moment, gazing at the *Guinguette*, then ran down to the water. Maigret recognized one of his men. It took him quite a time to cast off, then he rowed with all his might across the stream.

Maigret stood up, looking at Victor.

"You'll stay just where you are."

"Anything to oblige!"

Outside, nobody thought of ordering a drink. All eyes were turned on the man in black, rowing. Maigret walked down to the reeds by the water-side, where he waited impatiently.

"What's the matter?"

The detective was out of breath.

"Jump in. . . . I swear it wasn't my fault: . . ."

He rowed back, this time with Maigret in the stern-sheets.

"Everything was perfectly quiet. The man with the vegetables had just left. . . . Madame Basso and the boy were walking together in the garden. . . . I admit there was something funny about them. As though they were expecting something. . . . A car drove up, a brand-new one by the look of it, stopping exactly at the gate. A man got out. . . ."

"Rather bald, but still young?"

"Yes. Well, he joined the others, and the three of them walked up and down the garden, talking. . . . You know the place we watch from, don't you? Quite a little way off. Too far to hear anything that was said. . . . Then they shook hands, walked over to the car, and the chap got in and started her up. And just as he was putting the clutch in, the other

two made a dive into the rear seats. . . . I hadn't time to get there. The car went off at the hell of a rate."

"Who fired the shot?"

"I did. I hoped to puncture one of the tyres."

"Was Berger with you?"

"Yes. I was on duty, but he'd strolled over to have a chat. I sent him off at once to Seineport to telephone all round."

It was the second time the alarm had been given to all the *gendarmeries* of Seine-et-Oise. The boat had reached the other bank. Maigret jumped out and walked up the garden. What was to be done? Nothing. Only to telephone, and Berger was already doing that.

Maigret bent down and picked up a woman's handkerchief embroidered with Madame Basso's initials. It was wet and almost torn to ribbons by the chewing she had given it while waiting for James.

But what upset the inspector was the memory of all the Pernods he had drunk at the *Taverne Royale*, all those hours he had whiled away sitting lethargically by James' side, staring out into the sun-bathed or rain-drenched street.

He resented that memory, resented the thought that he had let himself slide, played himself false.

"Shall I still keep watch on the house?"

"What for? To see it doesn't run away too? . . . No, run over to Seineport as fast as you can. Take Berger with you and join in the hunt. See if you can get hold of a motor-bike, so that you can keep me posted."

An envelope lay by the vegetables on the kitchen table. It was addressed to Madame Basso, and Maigret felt sure it was in James' writing.

The letter had evidently been delivered with the vegetables. It had told her to be ready. And from the moment she had

received it she had walked nervously up and down the garden, her teeth tugging at the corners of her handkerchief.

Maigret walked down to the boat and rowed slowly back to the *Guinguette*, where he found half the gang clustered round Victor. Someone had stood him a drink, while the doctor was asking him questions.

And Victor was so pleased with himself that he actually winked at the inspector, as much as to say:

"Just you watch! I'm getting on beautifully."

Then he went on with his explanation:

"What they do—and it was a big specialist, or so they told me—what they do is to stick a hollow needle into you and blow you up like a tyre. Then they stick the place up to keep the air in."

The doctor smiled at the crudeness of the description, but none the less nodded approval.

"They do it first on one side and then on the other. You see, there's a lung on each side—isn't that right, Doctor?"

"Yet you drink stuff like that?"

"Oh, that much won't do me any harm."

"Do you have cold sweats at night?"

"Sometimes. Particularly when I sleep in a draughty barn!"

"What are you drinking, Inspector? I hope nothing's happened to make them send for you like that. . . ."

"Tell me, Doctor, is James using your car this morning?"

"He asked me to let him try it. He'll soon be back."

"I doubt it."

The doctor started, then tried to smile as he stammered:

"You . . . you're joking. . . ."

"There's no joke about it at all. He's using it at this moment to make off with Madame Basso and her son."

"James! . . ."

It was the Englishman's wife who spoke:

"James! . . . You don't mean . . . ?"

"Yes, I do. . . ."

"It must be a practical joke. He's always ready for anything of that kind."

The only one to enjoy himself was Victor, who kept his eyes on Maigret while blissfully sipping his *apéritif*.

The innkeeper returned from Corbeil in his pony-cart, filled with cases of siphons.

"More trouble!" he said as he passed the group. "You can't drive half a mile along the road without being stopped and questioned by a *gendarme*. Fortunately they all know me. . . ."

"On the Corbeil road?"

"Yes. They're at it now. At the bridge there's a queue of twenty or thirty cars. Everybody's got to show his papers. Everybody—not only the drivers."

Maigret looked away. It wasn't his doing. It was merely routine, and there was nothing else to be done. All the same, it was a coarse, clumsy method. No wonder people grumbled. It was a bit thick to be held up on the road two Sundays running. And not even for a sensational case. There had been too little to go on, and the papers hadn't treated it as front-page news.

But was it Maigret's fault, after all? Had he bungled the case? Once more his thoughts reverted to the *Taverne Royale*, to those hours spent sitting by James' side.

"What are you having?" he was asked again.

Maigret was fed up. Fed up with himself, fed up with everybody, fed up with the whole of this Sunday-at-Morsang atmosphere.

"Some beer," he grunted.

"At this time of the morning?"

And the well-meaning young man who had offered him an *apéritif* was astonished when Maigret let loose:

"Yes, some beer! And at this time of the morning!"

Victor, too, came in for a very nasty look. Meanwhile the doctor was trying to forget about his car.

"An interesting case," he was saying to his neighbour, with a jerk of his head in Victor's direction. "They seem to have done the pneumo-thorax pretty thoroughly. . . ."

And then in an undertone:

"Not that it makes much difference. I'd give him a year at the outside."

* * * *

Maigret lunched at the *Vieux Garçon*, sitting alone at his table, savage, ready to bite anyone who came too close. The second time Janvier came to report, it was to say:

"No luck. The car was sighted on the Fontainebleau road, but there's been no sign of it since."

The Fontainebleau road! Just the place! A fine jam there'd be, with literally hundreds of cars standing in queues!

Two hours later the news came through that a garage in Arpajon had supplied petrol to a car answering to the description that had been circulated.

But wasn't it a mistake? For the garage-man swore there was nobody in the car except the driver.

It wasn't till five o'clock that a telephone call came through from Montlhéry to say the doctor's car had finally been located. It had been streaking round and round the racing-track, as though on a speed trial. Then one of the tyres had gone flat and the car been brought to a standstill. It was more by luck than anything else that the policeman on duty there had asked to see James' driving licence. He had been unable to produce one.

The garage-man had been right. James was all alone. They asked Maigret what was to be done with him.

"Hold on," was the answer. "I'm coming."

"To behave like that with a new car!" whined the doctor. "I'm beginning to think the fellow's mad. Either that or he's drunk. . ."

And he asked Maigret if he could come with him.

o

Chapter VI

THE PRICE FOR A NAME

A CAR was procured, and Maigret drove off with the doctor. First of all, they went round to the *Guinguette à Deux Sous* to pick up Victor. The latter winked again—this time to the landlord as he took his seat. A wink which meant:

"Look what a fuss they're making of me!"

He sat facing Maigret. He even had the impudence to ask them to shut the window on account of his one lung.

There were no races that day on the track. A few people, however, were doing practice-runs in front of the empty pavilions. The lifelessness of the place made it seem all the vaster.

Some distance off, to one side of the track, was a car with a *gendarme* standing over it. Near it was a motor-cycle whose owner, in a leather cap, was kneeling on the ground tinkering with the engine.

"There you are," said someone.

Victor was more interested in a racing-car that was haring round the track at well over a hundred miles an hour. Forgetting his lung, he eagerly opened the window to see it better.

"That's my car all right," said the doctor as they came to a halt. "Let's hope he hasn't ruined it."

Standing by the motor-cycle, James was giving advice to the kneeling figure. He stood there with his chin in his hand, with apparently no thought for anything but the engine that

wouldn't go, till suddenly, raising his eyes, he saw the others approaching.

"Hallo! You here already?"

He looked Victor over from head to foot, apparently wondering what he was doing there.

"Who is he?"

If Maigret had set any store by this meeting, he was certainly disappointed. Victor, for his part, hardly looked at the Englishman at all. He was too interested in the racing-car. The doctor had opened the bonnet of his car and was ruefully wondering how much it had suffered by being driven like that before ever having been run in.

"Have you been here long?" growled the inspector.

"I really don't know. . . . Perhaps quite a time. . . ."

His self-possession was nothing short of incredible. No one could possibly have guessed from his manner that he had carried off a woman and a boy under the eyes of the police. No one could have guessed that it was on his account that the whole police force of Seine-et-Oise had been called out, and ten thousand cars stopped on the road.

"Don't worry," he said to the doctor. "There's no harm done except for the tyre. I didn't really drive so fast. She's a nice bus. The clutch is a little stiff perhaps, but otherwise . . .

"I suppose that's what Basso came to see you about yesterday? Asked you to fetch the family?"

"You know very well, old chap, that I can't answer questions of that sort."

"Nor tell me where you took them?"

"Put yourself in my place. . . ."

"Well, there's one thing I give you full marks for. There aren't many professionals that would have thought of that."

James looked at him with modest surprise.

"What?"

"The racing-track. Having disposed of Madame Basso, you didn't want to be discovered too soon. The roads would soon be guarded, so you thought of this place. And if it hadn't been for the puncture you might still have been going round and round undisturbed."

"I always wanted to have a go at it one day, and it seemed a good opportunity. . . ."

But the inspector was no longer listening. He had caught sight of the doctor getting out the spare wheel.

"You can change the wheel if you like, but I'm afraid we'll have to keep the car."

"What? *My* car? What have *I* done?"

His protests were in vain. As soon as the wheels were changed, the car was put into a private lock-up and Maigret himself pocketed the key. James quietly smoked a cigarette. Victor still gazed at the cars that swished by. The *gendarme* asked for instructions.

"March this one off," said Maigret, pointing to Victor. "He's to be kept until further orders in a cell at the *Police Judiciaire*."

"What about me?" asked James.

"Do you still refuse to tell me anything?"

"Put yourself in my place. . . ."

Maigret sulkily turned his back.

* * * *

Monday was grey and raining. Maigret found it comforting, as it suited his own sombre mood and the day's uncongenial tasks.

First of all, a report had to be written up on the previous day's events, a report in which the inspector was expected to justify the use he had made of the forces under his command.

At eleven he was called for by two experts of the *Identité Judiciaire* and driven down to the track at Montlhéry, where he stood around watching them at work.

The doctor had only driven forty miles since the car had been delivered from the works in the middle of the week. The total mileage now showing was just over a hundred and fifty. How much of that had been run on the track? From witnesses' accounts the evening before, it was estimated at about fifty. It was necessarily a rough estimate, but they had nothing else to go on, so it was assumed that James had driven about sixty miles before arriving at Montlhéry.

The distance by the shortest route from the Bassos' villa was barely twenty-five, so he had obviously been pretty far afield. A map was produced and a circle drawn on it to indicate his possible range of action.

Then came the examination of the tyres with the aid of high-powered lenses. Dust and débris were carefully scraped out of the treads, and some was put aside for chemical or microscopical examination.

"Hallo!" said one. "This looks like tar."

The map was referred to. It was a special map, furnished by the *Ponts-et-Chaussées*, showing all the work that was being done on the roads. Within the circle they had drawn there were five places, widely separated, where tar had recently been put down.

"Limestone dust. . . ."

Another map was produced, a military one, showing road surfaces. Maigret walked gloomily up and down, smoking.

"No limestone roads in the direction of Fontainebleau. But here's a stretch between Arpajon and La Ferté-Alais. . ."

A little later:

"Some grains of corn here. . . ."

The data gradually accumulated. The maps were heavily

scored with red and blue pencil-marks. At two, one of them telephoned to the mayor of La Ferté-Alais to ask what building operations were going on in the town, and more precisely whether Portland cement was likely to have been spilt on any of the roads in the district. The answer didn't come through till three.

The water-mills on the Essonne were being reconstructed. There were traces of Portland cement on the road from La Ferté to Arpajon.

That was something, if not very much. The experts gathered up their instruments and specimens, and all three returned to Paris, Maigret to his office, the others to their laboratory.

For the best part of an hour, the inspector, with a map spread out before him, was telephoning through to country *gendarmeries* in the affected area.

With that done, he left his room, intending to have a chat with Victor, whom he had not seen since his arrest. But before he was half-way down the stairs an idea flashed across his mind. Hastily retracing his steps, he picked up the telephone and asked for the accountant in Basso's office.

"Hallo! Police! Will you please tell me the name of your bank? . . . *Banque du Nord*, Boulevard Haussmann? Thanks. . . ."

He went straight there and asked for the manager. Five minutes later, another piece of data had been added to the case. At ten that very morning, James had entered the bank and cashed a cheque for three hundred thousand francs drawn by Marcel Basso.

The cheque was dated the previous Thursday.

* * * *

"The chap downstairs wants to see you. Keeps on saying he's something important to tell you."

Maigret went ponderously down the stairs and entered the cell.

Victor Gaillard was sitting on a bench, his elbows on the table, his head on his hands.

"What is it?"

The prisoner jumped to his feet. A cunning look spread over his features. Shifting his weight from one leg to the other, he began evasively:

"You haven't found out anything, have you?"

"Go on! Cough it up!"

"You see! I knew you wouldn't. . . . I'm no bigger fool than the rest of you, and during the night I've been thinking things over. . . ."

"And you've decided to talk?"

"Just a moment! We must come to an understanding first. . . . I don't know what Lenoir told you, but I'm quite sure it wasn't very much. If he did talk, it wasn't enough to put you wise. In other words, without me you're stuck, and you'll go on being stuck. In fact, it'll only get worse and worse.

"No, you can't do without me, and what I says is this: a secret like that's worth money. A lot of money. After all, suppose I went to the chap? What wouldn't he give me to keep my mouth shut? Anything I liked to ask."

Victor looked exceedingly pleased with himself, pleased as only those can be who are accustomed to be kicked and who suddenly find that the boot is on the other foot. All his life the police had treated him like dirt, and now he'd got the whip-hand. He grinned with satisfaction and did his best to look suitably important.

"It boils down to this: Why should I give a fellow away who's never done a thing to me? . . . And what can you do to me if I don't? You could have me gaoled for vagrancy,

I don't say you couldn't. Only, you'd be forgetting that lung of mine. After two days I'd be in the infirmary, and after two more they'd send me back to a *sana*."

Maigret looked hard at him, but said nothing.

"Now, what'd you say to thirty thousand francs? You can't call that a lot of money. Not for a thing like that. And it's no more than just enough to let me have a decent time for a year or two—and that's all the doctors give me. . . . Besides, what's thirty thousand francs to the Government? . . ."

Maigret was still listening. It seemed to be going splendidly. Victor had hardly thought it would be as easy as all that. He was exultant. A fit of coughing interrupted him, bringing tears to his eyes, but you might have taken them for tears of triumph.

Wasn't he cunning? And didn't he hold all the cards?

"It's my last word. Thirty thousand, and I'll spew up the whole story. You'll get your man, and what's more, you'll get a pat on the back for having been so smart. . . . Thirty thousand, or you won't get a word out of me. Not a word. You can do what you like with me—it won't do a bit of good. Just think—it's six years ago, and there were only two witnesses. Only Lenoir, who's now wearing a wooden overcoat, and yours truly, Victor Gaillard."

He grinned again at his own facetiousness.

"Is that all you've got to tell me?" asked Maigret, who hadn't moved a muscle from start to finish.

"You think it's dear?"

It wasn't what Maigret had said, but his imperturbable calmness, that brought a note of anxiety into Victor's voice. For the inspector's face was like a stone.

"You can't frighten me, you know."

Victor forced a little laugh.

"And I know the ropes. I know all the tricks of your trade. You could beat me up, for instance. But wouldn't you know all about it afterwards when the papers got hold of it? And wouldn't I see they did? Beating up a one-lunged man . . .!"

"Is that all?"

"I tell you once more; you can't do without me, and that's a fact. And what's thirty thousand francs for . . .?"

"Is that all?"

"And don't go thinking I'll give the show away. If you release me, I shan't go running round to the chap. No, nor writing either, nor telephoning . . ."

The voice was no longer the same. An anxious, plaintive voice. All the same, he struggled on.

"In any case, I want a lawyer. You can't refuse. And I know as well as you do that you've no right to keep me more than twenty-four hours without a charge."

Maigret blew out a cloud of smoke, thrust his hands into his pockets, and turned on his heel. To the man outside he said:

"Shut him up again."

He was furious. Now that he had left the cell he had no need to conceal his feelings.

It was enough to make anybody wild. He had his witness in the hollow of his hand. Yet what could he do to the dirty little . . .?

Blackmail. A new sort of blackmail. Blackmailing Maigret himself on the strength of that bloody lung of his.

Three times, four times in the course of that little interview, the inspector had been on the point of hitting out. But he'd held himself in.

Just as well he had. Beating up a one-lunged man! Victor had been quite right. The papers would have squeezed the

last drop of juice out of it. There were some that would have written up two whole columns on that one little fact.

Legally Maigret hadn't a leg to stand on. Victor had lived all his life on petty theft and dirty work of every kind. But that didn't mean there was a single charge to be preferred against him.

Except vagrancy. A wretched charge at the best of times.

And even then . . . If he did get sentenced, what was the use of that? His lung would pull him through anything. And didn't Victor Gaillard know it?

So he calmly asked for thirty thousand francs. And he was quite right, too, when he said they couldn't detain him more than twenty-four hours without charging him.

"Let him go," said Maigret savagely. "Let him go tonight at one o'clock. And tell Lucas not to let him out of sight."

And Maigret left the Quai des Orfèvres, biting viciously on to the stem of his pipe.

Just one word from Victor, and the case would be over. Without that one word he might go on floundering for ever.

"To the *Taverne Royale*," he snapped, after hailing a passing taxi.

* * * *

James wasn't there, and though Maigret waited till eight o'clock, he never showed up. The inspector went round to the bank where he worked, where the night-watchman said he'd left as usual, at five.

Maigret dined off a plate of choucroute, then telephoned to his office.

"Has Victor asked to see me again?"

"Yes. He says he's thought it over, and he's ready to come down to twenty-five thousand, but not a franc less."

"Is that all?"

"And he says, in his condition, he's entitled to have butter on his bread. Then he says the cell's not up to regulation temperature."

Maigret rang off and wandered along the Boulevards. As darkness fell, he hailed a taxi, ordering the driver to take him to James' flat in the Rue Championnet.

Huge as a barracks, the house consisted of modest flats, inhabited by clerks, commercial travellers, and small *rentiers*.

"Fourth floor on the left," said the concierge.

There was no lift, and the inspector slowly climbed the four floors, receiving on each landing, through the front door, a hint of the life within—the crying of a baby . . . the tinkling of a piano. . . .

James' wife opened the door. She was wearing a rather beautiful dressing-gown of royal blue. One couldn't say she was expensively dressed, but there was nothing poor about it either.

"Do you want to speak to my husband?"

The hall was no bigger than a good-sized kitchen table. On the walls were photographs of sailing-boats, bathers, and young people dressed in flannels.

"It's for you, James."

She pushed open a door, and followed Maigret into the room, going back to her chair near the window and resuming her crochet.

The other flats in the house were doubtless furnished in the usual stodgy, old-fashioned style. Here, on the contrary, there was definitely a touch of modernism. It was even a little arty-crafty and amateurish.

Partitions made of plywood had been put up to provide recesses and break the monotonous rectangularity of an ordinary room. Shelves had been put up too, and painted in bright colours. Apart from that, the furniture was scanty.

A plain carpet, startlingly green. The lamps were shaded with imitation parchment.

It was gay and fresh, but there was at the same time something flimsy about it. You had the feeling it would be unwise to lean too heavily against the walls, and also that the paint was still wet.

Above all, you had the feeling, when James stood up, that the place was too small for him, that he'd been shut up in a pretty box, in which there was not enough room to move about in or air to breathe.

Through a half-open door on the right, a tiny bathroom was visible. Just big enough to hold a bath and give a few square feet of standing-room. As for the kitchen, it was no more than a cupboard with a little gas-cooker standing on a shelf.

James had been sitting in a small arm-chair with a cigarette between his lips. He had just put down a book. And Maigret had the feeling that there was no contact at all between these two people on whom he had suddenly intruded. He was sure of it.

James in his corner. His wife in hers. One reading, the other crocheting. The noise of trams and buses passing in the street.

That was all. No intimacy whatever.

James came forward, holding out his hand, smiling rather awkwardly, as though it embarrassed him to be found in such a place.

"Hallo, Maigret! How are you?"

But his easy familiarity didn't sound quite the same in this little doll's house of a flat. It clashed with the bright green carpet and the modern ornaments that stood here and there on the shelves.

"All right, thanks."

"Sit down. I was just reading an English novel."

And his eyes said clearly:

"Don't take any notice. It isn't my fault. This isn't *my* place. . . ."

His wife watched the two men, though without stopping her crocheting.

"Is there anything to drink in the place, Marthe?"

"You know very well there isn't."

Then to Maigret:

"It's his fault. If I keep any liqueurs here, they're only empty bottles in a few days. He drinks quite enough without that."

"Look here, Maigret! Suppose we went out for one?"

But before the inspector could answer, James' face clouded as he looked at his wife, who must have been making urgent signs behind Maigret's back.

"It's just as you like. . . ."

He sighed, closed his book, fidgeted with a paper-weight that lay on a low table.

The room was certainly small. Very small indeed to contain two completely separate lives.

On the one hand, a woman proud of her pretty little flat, doing the housework, crocheting, making her own clothes.

On the other, James, returning home punctually at a few minutes past eight every evening, eating in silence, then reading a book till it was time to go to bed on that divan heaped with multi-coloured cushions.

It was easier now to understand the *Taverne Royale*.

"One must have some place one can call one's own!"

Certainly there was nothing he could call his own here.

And Maigret answered:

"Yes. Let's go."

James gave a sigh of relief and made for the door.

"Just a moment while I put my shoes on."

He went into the next room, leaving the door open behind him. But his wife hardly lowered her voice to say:

"Never mind him. He's not quite like other people."

She counted her stitches:

"Seven, eight, nine. . . . Do you think he knows anything about Feinstein's death?"

"Where's the shoe-horn?" growled James.

They could hear him rummaging recklessly in a cupboard. Marthe looked at Maigret: a glance which meant:

"You see what he's like."

James returned, looking once more too big for the room.

"I shan't be long," he said.

"I know what that means!"

James made Maigret a sign to hurry. He was terrified Marthe might say something which prevented their going.

In the house next door on the left there was a bar frequented by taxi-drivers.

"It'll do, won't it? It's the only one handy."

A murky light shone on the zinc counter. At the back of the room, four men were playing cards.

"Good evening, Monsieur James. Same as usual?"

The landlord had risen to his feet and was already uncorking the brandy-bottle.

"What's yours?"

"The same."

With his elbows on the bar, James asked:

"Did you go to the *Taverne Royale*? . . . I thought you might. I couldn't manage it today."

"On account of the three hundred thousand francs, I suppose?"

James' face expressed neither surprise nor embarrassment.

"Put yourself in my place. Basso's been a good friend

to me, and we've had many a binge together. Here's how!"

"I'll leave the bottle with you," said the landlord, who was in a hurry to return to his cards.

He evidently knew James.

"Poor chap," went on the latter, "he hasn't had much luck. To fall into the arms of a woman like Mado! . . . By the way, have you seen her lately? She came to the bank this afternoon to ask me if I knew where Marcel was. Can you beat that? . . . As bad as that doctor whose car I borrowed. And we'd always been good friends too. And now—would you believe it?—he's rung me up to say he's very sorry but he'll have to claim damages. . . . Here's how!"

James had poured himself out a second glass.

"What do you think of my wife? She's nice, isn't she?"

Chapter VII

OLD ULRICH

THERE was one thing about James which Maigret found interesting to watch as they leant over the bar. As the Englishman drank, his eyes, instead of growing vague, as is the case with most people, became on the contrary progressively sharper, until they shone with an acuteness that was positively penetrating!

His hand never let go of his glass, except to take hold of the bottle. The voice, unlike the eyes, was hesitating and toneless. He didn't look at Maigret—in fact, he didn't seem to look at anything at all. He appeared to let go—to sink into the atmosphere around him.

The card-players exchanged a word or two from time to time. The zinc which covered the bar reflected the lights dully. When he opened his mouth, James spoke dully too:

"It's funny.... A man like you—strong, intelligent... and others too—detectives, policemen in uniform, magistrates, all sorts of people.... How many are there on the go, all told? As many as a hundred? I shouldn't be surprised—not if you count all the clerks at work behind the scenes, and the telephone operators, and all the rest.... Anyhow, let's call it a hundred. A hundred people working day after day, night after night, all because Feinstein was plugged. And with such a tiny bullet!"

For a moment he stared into Maigret's eyes, and the inspector was quite unable to tell whether he was jeering or speaking with intense seriousness.

"Is it really worth all that bother? . . . And all the time that wretched devil Basso is a hunted man. . . . Last week he was rich. He had an excellent business, a car, a country villa, a wife and a son. And now he can't even show his head out of the hole he's hiding in."

James shrugged his shoulders and looked round him disgustedly, or perhaps merely sadly. The drawl in his voice became more noticeable.

"And what do we find at the bottom of it all? . . . A woman like Mado. A woman who needs men. . . . And Basso goes and walks into the snare. I suppose there aren't many men who'd have refused, what with her looks and her vivacity. . . . You think there's no harm in it, at any rate only once. But then it's twice, and then it's a habit."

James gulped down a whole mouthful of brandy, then spat on the floor.

"Idiotic, isn't it? Result—one dead, and a whole family ruined. And a whole machinery started up, with a hundred people to turn the wheels. . . ."

What made it the more impressive was that he spoke without violence. It was no outburst. The words came out gently, lazily, while his eyes moved dejectedly from one object to another.

"I'll trump that," said an exultant voice behind him.

"And then Feinstein! Spending his life running after money, trying desperately to stave off disaster. That's all his life was—one long nightmare of scraping through by the skin of his teeth, squeezing his wife's lovers when there was nowhere else to turn. . . . And now that he's dead . . ."

"Or been killed," put in Maigret dreamily.

"Don't you think it would be rather hard to say which of those two had more effectively killed the other?"

There was a sort of dull, toneless morbidness in James'

words which made the atmosphere around them seem thicker and murkier than before.

"Yes. It's idiotic. I can see so well what happened. Feinstein in desperate need of cash. No doubt he's been stalking Basso from the moment of their arrival. Even when he looks so preposterous, dressed up as an old grandmother, he's thinking of the bills of exchange that have to be paid on the Monday. He watches Basso dancing with his wife, wondering what it's worth. Do you see? . . . The next day he gets his chance and tackles him. Basso, who's already been stung before, isn't having any. The other insists, whines about ruin and dishonour. Suicide would be better than that, so he whips out the revolver. . . .

"And all the time, of course, he's making it obvious that he's not by any means so blind as he looks. . . .

"Yes, I'd swear to it. . . . Something like that, anyhow, and all on a glorious Sunday afternoon by the river.

"And Basso tries to stop him. At all costs he wants to avoid a scandal. Isn't his own villa standing just on the other side of the water? So he snatches at the gun. . . .

"That's all. . . . All except for a tiny little bullet in Feinstein's guts."

James turned his head slowly and looked hard at the inspector.

"And now tell me: what the hell does it matter?"

This time he actually laughed. A laugh full of contempt.

"So there we are! One hundred people—or it might be only ninety—running backwards and forwards like ants, because someone's gone and poked the ant-hill! A colossal man-hunt for the wretched Basso, while Mado hunts him too, though for other reasons. Your husband may be shot, but that's no excuse for losing a lover!"

Then to the proprietor:

"*Patron!* How much is that?"

"But Basso's situation has changed a bit"—it was Maigret who spoke—"since he now has three hundred thousand francs in his pocket."

James merely shrugged his shoulders, as though to repeat once more:

"And what the hell does it matter?"

Then he started off again:

"I've just remembered how it all began. I mean between Basso and Mado. It was a Sunday afternoon, and the gang were at the Bassos', a lot of them dancing in the garden. Marcel was with Mado. Then someone bumped into them, or they tripped over something. Anyhow, they fell headlong, and right in each other's arms. . . . Everybody laughed. Even Feinstein."

James was picking up his change. He hesitated, put a coin down again.

"Just one more glass, *patron*."

He'd already had six, and yet he wasn't drunk. All the same, his head must have been heavy. He frowned, and ran his hand across his forehead.

"And I suppose you've got to go back to your Basso-chasing. . . ."

He sounded as though he genuinely pitied Maigret.

"Three wretched devils; a man, a woman, and a boy hounded and harassed, all because one fine day the man went to bed with Mado."

Was it his drawling voice? Was it his loose-limbed disdainful figure lolling over the counter? Whatever it was, Maigret was fascinated, one might even say obsessed, and it cost him a great effort to see the case from any other angle.

What the hell did it matter?

It wasn't so easy to answer.

"Well, well!" went on James with a sigh. "I'd better be going, or my wife may be putting a bullet in *my* guts. She's quite capable. Oh dear! How silly it all is!"

He opened the door and lounged out into the ill-lit street. Looking into Maigret's eyes, he said:

"A funny trade!"

"Being a policeman?"

"Yes. And being a man. . . . Do you know, my wife will go right through my pockets to see how much I've spent—in other words, how much I've had to drink. . . . *Au revoir.* Shall I see you tomorrow at the *Taverne Royale*?"

And Maigret was left alone, the prey of an uneasiness that took a long time to lift. It was as though all his ideas and all his standards had been thrown into the melting-pot. Even the street looked different, and the people who went by, and the tram. . . .

Yes, it all looked just like the ant-hill James had spoken of. An ant-hill in a state of upheaval! Merely because one ant was dead!

The inspector's mind ran back to the hosier's body lying in the long grass behind the *Guinguette à Deux Sous.* And the people clustering round, and the *gendarmes* on the roads, and the traffic jams because of all the cars they stopped. An ant-hill's upheaval!

"Curse that fellow!" muttered Maigret with an annoyance that was not untinged with affection.

He set his teeth and tried to shake his mind free of the picture of futility James had painted. But it was difficult to pick up his previous trains of thought. He couldn't even remember why he'd come to see James at all.

"I suppose we'd better try and find out where James took the three hundred thousand," he muttered without conviction.

And all the words succeeded in doing was to impose a

vision on his mind. The three Bassos, father, mother, and son, cringing in their hide-out, quaking at every sound outside.

"Curse him!" he muttered again. "And he always manages to make me drink more than I want."

Maigret wasn't drunk, but neither was he quite so sober as he would have liked. He went to bed in a thoroughly bad temper. He tried hard to focus his mind on other things, but snatches of his conversation with James kept coming back to him.

"One must have some place one can call one's own."

It was not only "some place," but a whole world of his own, that he stared into like a crystal-gazer through the mists of his milky-green Pernods, a world he casually lounged through, indifferent to the hard realities of life. . . .

A world, rather, in which there were no hard realities. A dreamy, unsubstantial world in which nothing really mattered, in which the rush and scramble of humanity had no more meaning than the scurrying of ants. . . .

This joyless, effortless outlook was terribly infectious. It had eaten its way into Maigret's brain to such an extent that he dreamt of the three Bassos, hiding in a cellar, listening in terror to the ceaseless tramp of men over their heads.

When he got up next morning, he was more than ever conscious of his wife's absence. She was still in Alsace, and the morning's post brought a postcard from her.

We are starting to make the apricot jam, and hope you will soon be here to taste it.

* * * *

He sat down heavily at his desk, whose pile of letters tottered over on to the floor. He grunted a "Come in!" to his clerk, who was knocking at the door.

"What is it, Jean?"

"Lucas rang up. He says: will you go round to the Rue des Blancs-Manteaux?"

"What number?"

"He didn't say. All he said was Rue des Blancs-Manteaux."

Maigret glanced hastily through the letters to make sure there was nothing urgent, then went to the Jewish quarter of which the Rue des Blancs-Manteaux was the principal street, housing second-hand dealers of every description, clustered under the shadow of the great national pawnshop, the *Mont-du-Piété*.

It was only half-past eight. The day's business had hardly begun. At the corner of the street he sighted Lucas, walking up and down, his hands in his pockets.

"Where is he?"

For it was Lucas who had been told off to keep track of Victor Gaillard after his release at one o'clock the previous night.

With a jerk of his chin, the detective indicated the figure of a man standing at a shop window.

"What's he doing there?"

"I've no idea. Last night he began by wandering about. Then he found a seat, and lay down and went to sleep. At five he was moved on by a policeman, and he came round here almost at once. Ever since then he's been strolling about, but always coming back to the same place and staring into that window with the obvious intention of arousing my curiosity."

Victor, who had noticed Maigret's arrival, now lounged off, whistling pertly. Coming to a doorstep, he sat down on it, like a man who has for the moment nothing better to do.

Maigret looked at the name over the shop window:

Hans Goldberg
Articles Bought and Sold
Bargains of Every Description,

while through the glass he could just make out the little man with a pointed beard who stood peering out into the street, wondering what was going on.

"Wait for me," said Maigret.

He crossed the street and entered the stuffy, smelly shop, that was chock-a-block with old clothes and a medley of articles of all kinds.

"What can I show you?" asked the man half-heartedly.

At the back of the shop was a glass-panelled door, and in the room behind a fat woman was visible washing the face of her three-year-old boy. A basin of water stood on the table by a pile of plates and a butter-dish.

"Police!" said Maigret.

"I thought as much."

"Do you know the chap who's been wandering about outside for the last couple of hours?"

"The thin chap who keeps coughing? . . . I've never seen him before. I was bothered about his hanging about like that, so I called my wife, and she didn't recognize him either. . . . He's not one of us."

"And this man?"

Maigret held out a photograph of Marcel Basso, which the other studied attentively.

"He's not a Jew either."

"Or this one?"

It was Feinstein.

"Yes."

"You know him?"

"No, I don't know him. But he's one of us."

"You've never met him?"

"Never. We hardly ever go out."

His wife kept looking at them through the glass-panelled door. She had now taken her second baby from its cradle. It sent up a pitiful wail as the washing began.

The second-hand dealer seemed pretty sure of himself. He slowly rubbed his hands together, waiting for further questions, and he looked round him with the obvious satisfaction of a respectable tradesman who has nothing on his conscience.

"Have you had this shop long?"

"Rather more than five years. Long enough to build up a good business with honest trade."

"And before that, who had the place?"

"Don't you know? Old Ulrich, the fellow who disappeared."

The inspector heaved a sigh of satisfaction. This looked promising.

"Was old Ulrich in the same line of business?"

"The police ought to know more about him than I do. All I've heard is that he didn't confine himself to buying and selling."

"A money-lender?"

"That's what they say. It seems he lived all alone. Nobody to do his housework. Nobody to help him with the shop. Then one day he disappeared, and the place remained shut up for six months. After that, I took it on, and if you make enquiries you'll find I've given it a different sort of reputation altogether."

"So you never knew Old Ulrich?"

"No. I didn't live in Paris in his time. Before coming here we were in Alsace."

The baby was still howling in the kitchen, while the elder

brother had opened the door and was standing gravely sucking his finger as he stared at Maigret.

"That's all I know. If I knew any more, I'd willingly tell you."

"Right! Thanks."

After a final glance round him, Maigret went back into the street, walking up to Victor, who was still sitting on his doorstep.

"So you wanted to bring me here?"

"Where?" asked Victor, with obviously feigned innocence.

"What's this story of Old Ulrich?"

"Old Ulrich?"

"That's enough of playing the fool!"

"Never heard of Old Ulrich. I swear I haven't."

"I suppose he's the bloke who dived into the Canal Saint-Martin?"

"I've no idea. . . ."

Maigret shrugged his shoulders and walked off, saying to Lucas as he passed:

"Just as well to keep an eye on him still."

Half an hour later he was absorbed in the study of dusty old files. In the end he came upon the document he was seeking:

Jacob Ephraim Levy, alias Ulrich, aged 62, formerly of Upper Silesia, now second-hand dealer in the Rue des Blancs-Manteaux. Suspected of habitually infringing the usury laws.

Disappearance reported March 22nd. Had not been seen since the 19th.

No clues found in the house. No sign of robbery. 40,000 *francs found sewn in mattress.*

As far as can be ascertained, Ulrich went out on the evening of the 19th, a thing he frequently did.

No indications of his private life. Enquiries made in Paris and the provinces. No sign of him anywhere. Police in Upper Silesia informed, and a month later a sister arrived who took possession of all property after duly waiting till six months from date of disappearance.

* * * *

At twelve o'clock Maigret was sitting in the district *commissariat* of La Villette. It was the third he had been to that morning, and he had had about enough of files. This time, however, the search was not in vain.

Taking a sheet of paper, he copied out:

July 1st. A body found by bargees near the lock in the Canal Saint-Martin. Taken to the Institut Médico-légal, *who report as follows:*

Male. Height 5 ft. 8 in. Apparent age between 60 and 65. Body in an advanced stage of decomposition. Clothing has been largely torn away. Nothing found in trouser-pockets. No ring or other distinguishing marks.

Maigret sighed with satisfaction as he returned the file to its shelf. At last he was clear of the vague and morbid atmosphere that James had been pleased to cast over the case.

He was now on solid ground.

There was no doubt whatever—at any rate, not to his mind. It was Old Ulrich who had been killed six years ago and thrown into the canal.

Why? Who had done it?

He smiled. That was what he was going to find out.

Bidding good-morning to his colleagues of the local *commissariat*, he went out into the street, where he slowly and voluptuously lit his pipe, standing all square on his heavy legs.

Chapter VIII

IN MADO'S FLAT

THE accountancy expert came into Maigret's office, rubbing his hands, his face wreathed in smiles.

"That's that!"

"What's that?"

"I've been right through the hosier's books again. Feinstein didn't keep them himself, but had a man in once or twice a week—a bank clerk, or something of the sort, who came round after hours. Everything quite straightforward apart from the usual little tricks to diddle the tax-collector. The sort of business you can take in at a glance. And a business that wouldn't have been worse than hundreds of others if it hadn't been for lack of capital. Wholesalers were paid on the 4th or the 10th of each month. Always a struggle. Often bills were redated. Every now and again there'd be a sale to rake in a bit of cash at all costs. And then—Ulrich."

Maigret let him run on. He knew this voluble little man, who paced up and down the room.

"The same old story! . . . It's in the books of seven years back that Ulrich's name first appears. A loan of two thousand francs to be repaid on a certain date. It's no sooner paid back than it's borrowed again. And this time repayment is followed by a loan of five thousand. You follow? . . . Feinstein had found an unfailing source to tide him over difficulties. It becomes a habit. Six months later the initial two thousand has grown to eighteen thousand. And the loan of eighteen

has to be repaid by twenty-five thousand. Old Ulrich isn't the man to do the job by halves!

"Feinstein struggles on. He always pays up on the nail, but only at the cost of getting deeper and deeper into debt. The twenty-five thousand are paid on the 15th of the month, and on the 20th another eighteen are borrowed. A few days after they're paid off, there's a fresh loan of twenty-five thousand. In the middle of March there's over thirty-three thousand owing."

"What happened then?"

"From that moment there's no further trace of Ulrich in the books."

Naturally! There was no trace of him anywhere! Except at the bottom of a canal! . . .

So Feinstein was thirty-three thousand francs the richer by the old money-lender's death.

"Who took Ulrich's place?"

"For a time nobody. The old chap's disappearance must have given the hosier a breathing-space. It wasn't till a year later that he was in a tight corner once again and went to a small bank for credit. They gave it him, but they seem to have got tired of him pretty quickly."

"And Basso?"

"His name doesn't figure in the books at all. But Feinstein had been overdrawing his account in recent months, and I've found out from the bank that it was on the strength of a guarantee."

"Given by Basso?"

"Yes."

"And what was the position at the time of Feinstein's death?"

"Much the same as ever. The overdraft was never very much less. On the whole, it was mounting up slightly. . . . I

dare say there are a thousand shopkeepers in Paris in much the same predicament, going through a small crisis every month when debts fall due, and just staving off bankruptcy."

Maigret stood up and reached for his hat.

"Thank you, Monsieur Fleuret."

"Would you like me to go into it further?"

"Not for the moment, thanks."

Everything was going well. The machinery James had scoffed at was turning round smoothly. Maigret, on the other hand, looked definitely glum, as though he mistrusted this very smoothness.

"Any news of Lucas?" he enquired of his clerk.

"He telephoned a little while ago. Victor's been round to the Salvation Army and asked for a bed. He's sleeping now."

That was not surprising, since he hadn't so much as a copper-piece in his pocket. Was he still hoping to rake in thirty thousand francs by giving the name of Old Ulrich's murderer? Or rather twenty-five thousand, which he'd given as his lowest figure!

Maigret walked along the quays. Passing a post office, he hesitated, then went in. Snatching up a telegraph form, he wrote:

Probably arriving Thursday. Love to all.

* * * *

It was Tuesday. He was still hoping to rejoin his wife before she returned from Alsace. He left the post office, filling his pipe as he went. Once again he hesitated, then hailed a passing taxi, giving the address of the Feinsteins' flat in the Boulevard des Batignolles.

He had handled hundreds of cases in the course of his career, and he knew very well that the great majority of them could be divided into two distinct phases.

The first consisted in the detective's making contact with a new atmosphere, with people of whose existence he had been unaware a few hours before, people who made a little world of their own, and whose little world had been suddenly shaken by the irruption of some drama.

Enter the detective, a stranger if not an enemy, encountering hostile or suspicious glances on every hand. Sullen faces, cunning faces. Or, on the other hand, the distraught faces of those who are racked by suffering or terror and have cast away the last shreds of reticence and self-respect.

This of course was the fascinating phase, at least for Maigret. The groping, probing phase, often without any real point of departure. A dozen different ways look equally hopeful—or hopeless. A dozen different people, and any one of them may be guilty, or at any rate an accomplice. Nothing to be done about it. Only to wait, to turn round and round, keeping one's nose to the ground. . . .

And then suddenly a scent is picked up. Something real, something definite. And with that the second phase begins. The clutch is slipped in, the machinery starts turning, and the investigation proper, relentless and methodical, begins. Each step brings fresh facts to light. The detective is no longer alone with his problem. Others are there too, hosts of others, and time is now on his side.

Even when there is no longer any doubt, the machinery goes on turning just the same, till everything is proved up to the hilt.

Only occasionally the vagueness and mystery of the first phase would last right up to the solution of the mystery. But those were the rare and marvellous exceptions. Those were the real Maigret "cases."

Where was he now? Maigret knew that the body in the canal was that of Old Ulrich the usurer. And he knew that

Feinstein had owed him money. Did that mean that the second phase had begun?

A quarter of an hour later he was knocking on the door of a fifth-floor flat of a house in the Boulevard des Batignolles. It was opened by a stupid-looking servant with straggling hair, who seemed uncertain whether to admit him or not.

But, looking over her shoulder, the inspector noticed something: James' hat hanging in the hall.

Was this indeed the second phase, in which everything moved forward with mechanical regularity?

Or was there a tooth broken on one of the wheels?

* * * *

"Is Madame Feinstein in?"

By all appearances, the maid was new to the job and fresh from the country. Maigret took advantage of her awkwardness, and walked straight past her, making for a door behind which were voices. He had the grace to knock, but he opened it without waiting for an answer.

He knew the room already, not that there was very much to know it by. A little salon, just like ten thousand others, with its silly little arm-chairs with gilt feet. The first person he saw was James, who stood by the window, staring out into the street.

Madame Feinstein was dressed, all in black, ready to go out, with a saucy little crêpe hat on her head. She appeared to be thoroughly worked up about something.

On the other hand, she didn't seem the least put out by the sight of Maigret. It was otherwise with James, whose face when he turned showed annoyance not altogether free from embarrassment.

"Come in, Inspector! . . . You've come at a very good moment. I was just telling James not to be so stupid. . . ."

"Ah!"

It looked exactly as though Maigret had butted in on a domestic squabble. It was in a hopeless, half-hearted voice that James pleaded:

"Look here, Mado. . . ."

"Don't interrupt me. I was speaking to the inspector. . . ."

With an air of resignation, the Englishman turned back to his window to gaze at the foreshortened figures in the street far below.

"Of course, if you were an ordinary policeman, monsieur, I wouldn't think of talking to you like this. But you've joined in with the gang at Morsang. And, anyhow, it's not hard to see that you're the sort of man who's capable of understanding. . . ."

And she the sort of woman capable of talking for hours at a stretch! Capable of calling the whole world to witness on her behalf! Capable of silencing the most loquacious!

Really her good looks did not amount to very much. But there was certainly a freshness and sparkle about her that her black clothes showed up to all the greater advantage.

Obviously she'd be good fun, so long as it was only a question of fun. Just the sort to have a riotous affair with.

Impossible to imagine a more complete contrast to James, the loose-limbed, contemplative, phlegmatic James, who had not an ounce of crispness in the whole of his make-up.

"Of course, everybody knows that I'm Basso's mistress. And I'm not ashamed of it either. I've never made a secret of it. And there's not one of the crowd at Morsang who'd think of blaming me for it. . . . Now, if my husband had been another sort of man . . ."

She hardly paused for breath.

"After all, it's a man's job to support a woman, isn't it?

And you can't keep a woman on debts. Just look at the place—look at the way I've had to live! . . . Besides, he was never here. Or, if he did spend an evening at home once in a way, it was only to talk of socks and shirts and braces, and his money worries, and the trouble he was having over one of the shop-girls. . . . And to my mind, if a man doesn't know how to make a decent life for his wife, he's nothing to say about it if she goes her own way. . . .

"Besides, Marcel and I were going to be married sooner or later. And that makes all the difference, doesn't it? You didn't know? Well, it isn't exactly the sort of thing one shouts from the house-tops. . . . It was only the thought of his son that made him hesitate. Otherwise he'd have been seeing about a divorce already. And so should I, and . . .

"Of course you know his wife, so you can judge for yourself. Not at all the sort of woman for him."

James sighed and sighed again. He was now staring at the carpet.

"And the question is: what is my duty now? Marcel's got in a mess, and of course the only thing is for him to go abroad. And obviously my place is by his side. Don't you think so? Tell me frankly. . . ."

"Hum! . . . Well! . . ." grunted Maigret, taking care not to commit himself.

"There you are, James! You see! . . . The inspector thinks just as I do. . . . Never mind about the world—I don't care what people say. . . . And this is the point, Inspector: James here is refusing to tell me where Marcel is.

"I can tell he knows by the way he talks. . . . You can't deny it, can you, James?"

If Maigret had not already had dealings with this type of woman, he would probably have been completely suffo-

cated. But he no longer allowed himself to be taken aback by feminine inconsistency.

It was less than two weeks since Feinstein had been killed, apparently by Basso.

And there in the dismal little flat, with the hosier's photograph hanging on the wall and the hosier's cigarette-holder lying in an ash-tray, his wife was talking of "her duty."

James' face was a picture! And not only his face. His shoulders, his whole attitude, the hang of his head—everything about him said:

"What a woman!"

She turned towards him.

"You see! The inspector . . ."

"The inspector has said nothing at all."

"There you go again! You simply disgust me. You're not a man at all—you're frightened of the least thing. . . . Supposing I were to tell the inspector why you came here today?"

It was so unexpected that James started. When he raised his head, his face had gone red as a beetroot. He was blushing right to the ears.

He wanted to say something. But he simply couldn't. He tried hard to recover his composure, but all he could produce was a painfully hollow laugh. Then at last he managed to say:

"Go on! Now you've started, you'd better tell him the whole story."

Maigret looked at Mado. She was a little disconcerted by what she had said.

"I didn't mean . . ."

"Oh no! Of course you 'didn't mean.' That doesn't alter the fact that . . ."

The room seemed even smaller than before. Mado shrugged her shoulders in a way that meant:

"All right, I will. And so much the worse for you."

Maigret could hardly keep a straight face, so great was the contrast between the James he had known hitherto and the one that was now standing before him who lamely said, in answer to the inspector's enquiring look:

"Oh well! I suppose you'd have found out sooner or later. . . . I've been with Mado too."

"Not for long, I'm glad to say," sneered Mado in return.

James winced at this answer. His eyes sought Maigret's as though for support.

"That's all. . . . It was a long time ago. . . . My wife never knew anything about it."

"And wouldn't she give you what for, if she ever did!"

"If I know anything about her, there'd be reproaches for the rest of our lives. . . . So I came to Mado to ask her to keep quiet about it, in case she was questioned."

"Did she promise?"

"On condition I gave her Basso's present address. Can you beat that? Especially as he's with his wife and his child. . . . In any case, I've no doubt he's across the frontier by now. . . ."

The voice failed ever so slightly at the last sentence. Obviously James was lying conscientiously.

Maigret had sat down in one of the little arm-chairs that creaked beneath his weight.

"So you weren't together very long?" he enquired in a good-natured, almost paternal tone.

"Quite long enough!" snapped Mado.

"No. Not very long," sighed James. "Only a few months."

"And I suppose you used to meet in a furnished room like those of the Avenue Niel?"

"James rented one in Passy."

"Were you already going to Morsang at that time?"

"Yes."

"And Basso too?"

"Yes. The gang hasn't changed much during the last seven or eight years. A few joining, a few leaving, but the bulk of them always the same."

"Did Basso know about you two?"

It was Mado who answered:

"Yes. He didn't take any interest in me then. It's only this last year that he's been in love with me."

In spite of himself, Maigret was beaming with satisfaction. He looked round the commonplace little drawing-room with its ornaments, all of them more or less horrors. He mentally compared it with James' home, more ambitious, more modern, even rather studio-like.

And then Morsang and the *Vieux Garçon*, the rowing- and sailing-boats, rounds of drinks on the shady terrace in the midst of a landscape of almost unnatural prettiness.

For seven or eight years the same little crowd had been gathering every Sunday, boating and bathing together, drinking together, playing bridge in the afternoon or dancing to gramophone records.

But in the early days it was James who slipped off behind the trees with Mado. And no doubt it was James who was the victim of Feinstein's equivocal glances as the latter asked for a small loan.

Everybody knew of Mado's affairs, except, as a rule, those most nearly concerned. Everybody conspired to keep what they knew from those who mustn't know: Basso no less than the others—until one day it was his turn to fall for her.

And now, in the Feinsteins' drawing-room, it was a piquant little comedy that was being played out, what with Mado's

brazen self-assurance and James' hang-dog looks. Turning to Mado, Maigret asked:

"How long is it since you and James were washed up?"

"Wait a moment! It must be five . . . no, more than that . . . something like six years."

"How did it end? Which of you broke it off?"

James wanted to speak, but she cut in first.

"Both of us. We simply came to the conclusion we weren't meant for one another. In spite of his bohemian airs, James is a thorough *petit bourgeois* at heart. Even stodgier than my husband."

"But you remained on friendly terms?"

"Why not? The fact that you're no longer in love is no reason for . . ."

"Tell me this, James: at that time did you ever come to lend Feinstein money?"

"Me? . . ."

And before he could say any more, Mado had chipped in again.

"What do you mean? James lend money to my husband? Why should he?"

"Never mind! Just an idea that flashed through my mind. . . . All the same, Basso did."

"That's different. For one thing, Basso's a rich man. My husband used to get into difficulties—temporary difficulties. And he even spoke of having to leave the country and go to America. And to avoid that, Basso did, once or twice . . ."

"Yes, yes. I quite understand. But mightn't your husband have threatened to go to America six years ago?"

"What are you insinuating?"

She was all ready for an outburst of indignation. And rather than face a scene of outraged virtue, Maigret preferred to change the subject.

"I'm sorry. Perhaps I was saying more than I meant. Please don't think I was insinuating anything at all. . . . As for you and your affairs, that's your business. And nobody else's. That's what a friend of your husband's said to me once—a man called Ulrich. . . ."

With half-closed eyes he watched them both. Mado looked back at him with genuine astonishment.

"A friend of my husband's?"

"Or he may have been only a business acquaintance."

"That's more likely. For I've never heard that name before. . . . What was it he said about me?"

"Nothing. We were speaking of men and women in general."

James looked astonished too, but not quite in the same way. More like a man who smells a rat, and wonders what the other fellow's up to.

"That's all very well. But it doesn't alter the fact that James knows where Marcel is. And he refuses to tell me. . . . All right! I'll find out for myself. You see if I don't! . . . Though, as a matter of fact, it's more than likely he'll write to me to ask me to come. After all, he can't live without me."

James gave Maigret a look, an ironical look certainly, but still more a mournful one, a look that seemed to say:

Is it likely he'd want to have her on his hands again? . . . A woman like that! . . .

In a final attempt, she rounded on him once more.

"Well, James? Is that your last word? So that's all the thanks I get for all I've done for you!"

"You've done a lot for him?" asked Maigret.

"But . . . He was the first man for whom I broke my marriage vows. Is that nothing? I never thought of such a thing till he came on the scene. . . . Of course, he was different then. He dressed properly, and he still had a head of hair."

This was a case that had from the start seemed destined to alternate between the tragic and the farcical. Just now, farce held the floor so completely that it needed an effort to grasp the fact that a certain Ulrich had been done to death and his body shoved unceremoniously into a canal. And that, six years later, Feinstein had been shot behind the *Guinguette à Deux Sous*, as a result of which Marcel Basso and all his family were being hunted day and night by the police.

"Do you think he has a chance of crossing the frontier, Inspector?"

"I . . . I really can't say."

"If it came to that, you'd help him, wouldn't you? I'm sure you would. You've been a guest in his house. And you know the kind of man he is. . . ."

"I must be going," said James, looking all round the room for his hat. "It's high time I was back at the bank."

"I'll come with you," said Maigret hurriedly.

Anything rather than to be left alone with Madame Feinstein.

"Really? Must you?"

She would have liked to keep him.

"Yes. I'm afraid I must. We're short-handed at headquarters. I'll come back another time."

"Marcel will be very grateful. And he's the sort of man who always repays a good turn."

She was very proud of her diplomacy. She could see it all perfectly—Maigret leading Basso by the hand up to the frontier, and gratefully pocketing a few bank-notes as a recompense.

When he held out his hand she gave it a long, significant squeeze. With a jerk of her head in James' direction, she whispered:

"We mustn't be too hard on him. . . . Since he's taken to drink, he's not quite what he used to be."

The two men walked down the Boulevard des Batignolles without saying a word, James with his long swinging stride, staring at the ground in front of him, Maigret puffing away merrily at his pipe and seeming to enjoy the spectacle of the busy, crowded street.

It wasn't till they came to the corner of the Boulevard Malesherbes that the inspector asked casually, as though it was of no importance:

"Is it true that Feinstein never tried to get money out of you?"

James shrugged his shoulders.

"He knew very well that I'd none to lend."

"Were you already at the bank in the Place Vendôme?"

"No. I was doing commercial translation for an American petroleum company—I was earning barely a thousand francs a month."

"You had a car?"

"The Underground . . . and that's all I have for a car today."

"Were you living in the same flat?"

"We hadn't a flat at all. Only a bedroom in a cheap hotel."

He looked thoroughly bored. There was an expression of disgust at the corners of his mouth.

"Shall we have a drink?"

And without waiting for an answer, he dived into the bar they were passing and ordered two brandies-and-water.

"As far as I'm concerned, I don't care two hoots, but I don't see the point of bothering my wife. She's got enough to worry about as it is. . . ."

"Is her health bad?"

Another shrug of the shoulders.

"You don't imagine it's much fun for her, do you? . . . Apart from Morsang, where she does manage to amuse herself a bit. . . ."

He threw a ten-franc note on to the bar, then asked abruptly:

"Are you coming to the *Taverne Royale* this evening?"

"I might."

As he shook Maigret's hand he hesitated, then, looking away, murmured:

"About Basso. . . . You haven't found out anything, have you?"

"Professional secret!" answered Maigret with a kindly smile. "You're fond of him, aren't you?"

But James was already striding away, and a few seconds later he had jumped on to a bus going in the direction of the Place Vendôme.

For a good five minutes Maigret stood motionless on the kerb, smoking his pipe.

Chapter IX

A POUND OF HAM

At the Quai des Orfèvres they were hunting upstairs and downstairs. Maigret was wanted urgently, as a message had come through from the *Gendarmerie* at La Ferté-Alais.

Basso family found. Await instructions.

It was a typical case of scientific work supplemented by a stroke of luck.

Firstly the scientific work: the examination of the tyres on the Montlhéry track, which had reduced the probable area to the district of which La Ferté-Alais was the centre.

But science took matters no further. In vain did the *gendarmes* search every hotel and inn of the neighbourhood, in vain were a hundred people questioned.

In fact, the only result of the expert's work was that the local police could think of nothing else.

And on this Tuesday a certain *gendarme* named Piquart went home to lunch as usual.

"I forgot to get some onions this morning," said his wife, who was feeding her baby. "Would you mind running round to fetch some?"

A little country-town grocer's in the market-place. There were already four or five customers, all women, clustered at the counter. Piquart, who hated errands of this sort, stood aloof by the door. And, standing there, he heard the shopman's wife say to the old woman she was serving:

"You'll soon be getting fat with all the ham you're eating these days! A pound! And with only yourself to eat it."

Piquart looked without any particular interest at the old woman, a wizened creature who was known to all as Mère Mathilde. Poverty was written all over her. And then, while the ham was being cut, the *gendarme's* brain began to work. His own household consisted of three, yet they would never have thought of buying a pound of ham for a meal.

Abandoning his errand, he sneaked out of the shop, and followed Mère Mathilde to her home on the edge of the town, on the Ballancourt road, a cottage surrounded by a tiny garden in which hens were pickering about. He let her go in first, then knocked on the door and demanded admission in the name of the law.

Madame Basso, with an apron tied round her waist, was busy at the kitchen stove. On a rush-seated chair in a corner Basso was just opening the paper that Mère Mathilde had brought in with her. The boy was sitting on the floor playing with a puppy.

* * * *

They telephoned to Maigret's flat in the Boulevard Richard-Lenoir and then tried various other likely places. It did not occur to them to ring up Basso's office on the Quai d'Austerlitz.

Yet that was where he went after James had left him. He was in a genial mood. His pipe between his teeth, and his hands in his pockets, he walked round the office, chatting and joking with the clerks. There being no instructions to the contrary, the business carried on exactly as before. On the quay, the cranes were in constant activity, unloading the barges of coal that arrived each day.

The offices were not modern. Not that they were ancient and dingy either. Taking a look round, it was easy to guess the way work was carried on.

For one thing, there was no private room for Basso. His desk was in one corner of the room, which also housed the chief accountant. His typist-secretary was at a desk near by.

Obviously Basso was not the man to stand on his dignity. Altogether there was a free-and-easy atmosphere about the place, the clerks smoking over their ledgers.

"Yes, we have an address-book," answered the chief accountant to Maigret's enquiry, "but naturally it only contains business addresses. . . . Here it is, if you'd like to see it."

Maigret opened it at the U's, on the off-chance of finding Ulrich's name, and was not surprised when he failed to.

"Didn't he have a private address-book too?"

"I don't know of one."

"Weren't his private affairs ever seen to in the office? . . . For instance, when his son was born, weren't notices sent round to all his friends? . . . Who was here at that time? . . ."

"I was," said the secretary, a little reluctant to make the admission, for she was thirty-five and tried to look ten years younger.

"Who sent out the notices?"

"I did."

"Did he give you a list of addresses?"

"A little book."

"Where is it?"

She hesitated, wondering whether she ought to disclose Basso's private affairs. She turned to the chief clerk, who nodded, as much as to say:

"There's nothing for it but to do what he asks."

"It's in his desk at home," she answered submissively. "If you'll come with me . . ."

They went across the coal-yard. On the ground floor of

the house, which was very simply furnished, was a study which looked as though it was never used. As a matter of fact, it was spoken of as the library.

The library of a family to whom reading did not mean very much. It was the place to keep anything that called itself a book, and that was about all. On one shelf were the prizes that Basso had won at school; on another, a series of bound numbers of the *Magazine des Familles*, dating fifty years back. Girls' books that Madame Basso had no doubt brought with her on her marriage. A number of yellow-backs bought on the strength of their advertisements. Lastly, some recent picture-books, belonging to the boy, whose toys filled up the shelves for which there were no books.

When the secretary opened a drawer of the desk, Maigret pointed to a large yellow envelope, sealed.

"What's that?"

"I believe it is monsieur's letters to madame when they were engaged."

"And the address-book?"

She looked in that drawer, then in another where there were nearly a dozen old pipes. Right at the back was the book they had come for. It was not really a proper address-book at all—just a little cheap note-book, that must have been at least fifteen years old. All the addresses were in Basso's writing, but it had changed with the years and the ink had faded.

It was rather like the seaweed cast up on the foreshore, which reveals the tide that brought it by the degree it has withered.

A good many of the addresses dated from the earliest period. Friends of Basso's youth. How many of them would be remembered now? Some names were crossed out, as the result of a quarrel perhaps, or a death.

Several women's addresses, such as:

Lola, Bar des Églantiers 18 *Rue Montaigne.*

But a line of thick blue chalk had eliminated Lola from Basso's life.

"Have you found what you wanted?" asked the secretary.

Yes. He had found it all right. A disreputable name that Basso hadn't even liked to write in full.

U. 13A, *Rue des Blancs-Manteaux.*

And both the writing and the faded ink showed this to be one of the earlier addresses too. Moreover, like so many of the others of its period, it had to be read through a thick stroke of blue chalk.

"Have you any idea when that address was written?"

"When Monsieur Basso was a young man and his father was still running the business."

"How do you know?"

"The ink's the same as the other addresses that are crossed out—the women's, I mean. Obviously they'd be before his engagement."

Maigret closed the little address-book and slipped it in his pocket, while the secretary looked at him reproachfully.

"Do you think he'll come back?" she asked, after a moment's hesitation.

The inspector confined his answer to a vague shrug of the shoulders.

When he arrived at the Quai des Orfèvres, he was told at once that they'd been looking for him, and as his heavy tread was heard in the corridor, his clerk, Jean, ran out to meet him.

"The Bassos have been found."

"Ah!"

Maigret sighed. Far from looking pleased, he seemed almost to take it as bad news.

"Has Lucas telephoned?"

"Twice. The man's still at the Salvation Army. He's up now. They've given him a meal and put him to do some cleaning."

"Is Janvier in?"

"I think he came in a few minutes ago."

Maigret went and found Janvier in another office.

"A thoroughly troublesome job for you, my boy. . . . I want you to hunt up a certain Lola who used to have her letters addressed to the *Bar des Églantiers* some fifteen years ago, or possibly more."

"And since then?"

"Since then anything! She may be dead and buried or have married an English lord. . . . It's up to you to find out."

In the train which took him to La Ferté-Alais he went through Basso's private address-book from cover to cover. More than once an indulgent, almost tender smile came on to his face, there were entries that spoke so eloquently of a man's wild oats.

* * * *

The *lieutenant de gendarmerie* met him at the station and drove him to Mère Mathilde's house, in front of which Piquart was standing gravely on guard.

"We made sure there was no way of getting out by the back," explained the lieutenant. "And there's so little room inside, I thought it would be all right for him to be in the garden. . . . Shall I come in with you?"

"Perhaps not."

Maigret knocked, and the door was promptly opened. There was no hall, so he found himself stepping directly

into the kitchen. It was getting late, and though still daylight outside, the window was so small that the figure in the room was little more than a shadow.

Basso sitting astride of a chair in the attitude of a man who has been waiting for hours and hours. No sign of his wife, who was doubtless in the next room with the boy.

"Can we have a light?" said Maigret to the old woman.

"I'll have to see first whether there's any oil in the lamp."

There was, and it was duly lit, the yellow flame gradually spreading till little by little its rays lit up the corners of the room.

It was very hot. A smell of poverty and country cottage.

"You can sit down again," said Maigret to Basso, and then to Mère Mathilde: "You can go into the next room, if you don't mind."

"What about my soup?"

"Run along! I'll see to that."

She went off, grumbling, and shut the door behind her. There was a murmur of voices in the next room.

"Are there only these two rooms?" asked the inspector.

"That's all. This and the bedroom."

"And you all slept there?"

"The two women and Pierrot. I managed in the corner here, on some straw."

Indeed, wisps of it were visible in the cracks between the uneven tiles. Basso was very calm, but with the sort of calmness that follows many days at fever-heat. It looked as though it was a relief to him to be arrested. In fact, the next thing he said was:

"I was going to give myself up."

He probably expected Maigret to look surprised, but the latter seemed to take it as the most natural thing in the world. He looked the coal-merchant over from head to foot.

"Isn't that one of James' suits?"

A grey lounge-suit. James was far from being of poor physique, but Basso was of a different build altogether, as broad and massive as Maigret himself. Few things can so belittle a man as a skimpy suit of clothes.

"There's no use denying it, if you know already."

"I know a good deal more than that, too. . . . But surely the soup doesn't need to go on boiling like that!"

Steam was puffing out of it, and the lid was dancing up and down. The air was heavy with soup. Maigret moved it to one side, his face being lit up by reddish flames till he put the ring in the hot-plate.

"You knew Mère Mathilde?"

"I wanted to speak to you about her, and to ask you whether it would be possible to leave her out of it. She was a servant in my parents' house for many years. She knew me when I was little. And when I came here and asked her to hide me, she hadn't the heart to refuse."

"Of course not. But she might have had the sense not to go buying a pound of ham at a time."

Basso had lost weight. He looked a sorry sight, particularly since he hadn't shaved for several days.

"And I take it that my wife won't get into trouble either?"

He stood up awkwardly and fidgeted, obviously trying to compose his features and master his voice before launching out into the difficult subject that had to be discussed.

"Of course I was wrong," he began, "to remain in hiding so long. In fact, I ought never to have run away. It was the worst thing I could have done. But perhaps that's really in my favour. . . . At least, if I'd been a real criminal I wouldn't have been so stupid. As it was, I lost my head. The whole of my life had crumbled to ruins in a second. And all because

of a trumpery little love-affair. . . . I had only one idea in my head: that I must get out of the country with my wife and son and start life over afresh."

"So you got James to bring them here, and also to cash a cheque for you. . . ."

"Yes."

"Only, it wasn't going to be so easy to get away, was it? You knew you were being hunted. . . ."

"Mathilde said she'd never seen so many *gendarmes* in her life."

They could hear noises from the next room—the boy scrambling about on the floor. Probably Madame Basso was listening at the door, for from time to time she said "Shhh," trying to hush him up.

"Today I came to the conclusion there was no other way out except to give myself up. But fate always seems to be against me. The *gendarme* got here first."

"Did you kill Feinstein or not?"

Basso looked fervently into Maigret's eyes.

"Yes . . . strictly speaking . . . I did," he said in a low quiet voice. "It's no use pretending I didn't. But I swear by all that's holy that what I'm going to tell you is the absolute truth. . . ."

"Just a moment!"

Maigret got up too. There they stood—two men of much the same build—under the low ceiling in the room that seemed too small for them.

"One question first: were you in love with Mado?"

Basso's lip curled with bitterness and disgust.

"Come on! You're a man too. Surely you can understand. . . . I'd known her for six or seven years—perhaps more. And all that time I'd never given her a thought. . . . Then one day . . . I hardly know myself just how it started. But some-

how or other I got kissing her, and then . . . at the bottom of the garden . . ."

"And after that?"

Basso sighed heavily. His shoulders drooped.

"She took it in earnest, swore she'd loved me all along and couldn't go on living without me. I'm no saint, and I know it's all my fault for starting it. But I never wanted to get tangled up in that way; I never wanted to risk breaking up my own home."

"So for that last year you've been meeting Mado secretly in Paris?"

"And she's been ringing me up every day. I've begged her again and again to be careful, but all to no purpose. She'd trump up any sort of pretext to ring me up again the very next day. . . . Oh, I knew the fat would be in the fire some day or other. . . . If only she hadn't been sincere! But I think she was genuinely in love with me. . . ."

"And Feinstein?"

"Yes," he groaned. "And Feinstein! That's why I couldn't bear the thought of facing a trial. There are limits to what one can say in court. There are limits to what public opinion will swallow. Can you see me in the witness-box—me, Mado's lover—accusing her husband of . . .?"

"Of blackmailing you!"

"To start with, what proof have I? None whatever. You and I may call it blackmail, but he never threatened to expose me, never even showed he knew. . . . You remember him, don't you? So polite! Too polite! And always with that slightly sad smile of his. . . .

"The first time, he brought me some bill or other which he had to settle within twenty-four hours. He begged me to lend him the money, giving me all sorts of assurances. Well,

I did what he asked . . . I should have done it in any case, quite apart from Mado. . . .

"Then he came to me again. And again after that. Until I tumbled to it that he was out to squeeze me systematically. I tried to wriggle out of it, and that's when the blackmail began.

"No threats. Just a heart-to-heart talk. He told me his wife was all he had to live for, that if he lived beyond his means it was only because he couldn't bear to refuse her anything, etc., etc.

"No. He'd rather kill himself than tell her she must go without something she wanted. And if he did, what would happen to her?

"It was always rather ambiguous. I hardly ever knew precisely what he was driving at. Only I knew very well he was driving at something. And he nearly always managed to corner me, just after I'd been with Mado. In fact, I was often scared by the thought that her perfume might be hanging about my clothes. Once, while we were talking, he quite casually picked a hair off my shoulder and threw it on the ground. Of course it was Mado's.

"No, he wasn't the threatening sort, but the whining sort. And, my God! couldn't he whine! You can stand up against threats, because they make your blood boil. But what can you do with a man who weeps on you?

"Yes, he actually came and wept in my office. You've never heard such a pathetic story: 'You're young and strong,' he said. 'You've good looks, and what's more, you're rich. While I'm only . . .'

"And so he went on. It made me ill to listen to him. Yet even then I couldn't really swear he knew.

"Now for that Sunday . . .

"He had already spoken to me before playing bridge. He

wanted fifty thousand francs urgently. . . . That's quite a lot of money, even if I am well off, and I said no, point-blank. Besides, I'd had about enough of it. And I told him if he bothered me again I'd refuse to have anything more to do with him.

"That's as far as it went then. But later on he manœuvred so as to cross the river with me. As soon as we were on the other side, he dragged me round to the back of the *Guinguette*.

"We were no sooner out of sight than he took that little revolver out of his pocket and pointed it at himself.

"'"This is what you condemn me to,' he said, 'and now all I ask is for you to take care of Mado!'"

Basso passed his hand across his forehead as though to wipe away the sordid memory.

"The whole thing was such rotten bad luck. I sprang forward to seize the revolver.

"'"No, no! It's too late now,' he cried, 'and it's your doing if I've come to this.'"

"Naturally he had no intention of doing it," grunted Maigret.

"I know. I'm sure of it. That's what makes it all so maddening. I was a fool. Of course I ought to have done nothing, and nothing would have happened. He'd merely have wept and changed his tune. But no! I was too simple-minded. Just as I've been with Mado, just as I've always been with everything.

"I made a dash at him. He drew back, but I managed to seize his wrist and I wrenched the gun out of his hand.

"He tried to snatch it back. . . .

"And that's when it happened. I really don't know how. I didn't want him to get it, and I suppose my fingers closed on the trigger automatically. The next thing I knew was that it had gone off and Feinstein had fallen on the ground.

"He went down like a bag of sand, without a word, without a sigh.

"But who's going to believe me when I tell that to a jury? What shall I look like?

"A man who's killed his mistress's husband! And who then blackens the dead man's name by talking of blackmail."

He spoke violently, worked up by his own story. Then, more quietly, he went on:

"So I ran away. But as soon as I was here my one thought was to have it out with my wife, to tell her everything. And then to ask her whether . . . after all . . . she still . . .

"Mathilde bought a ready-made suit of clothes, saying it was a present for one of her nephews. I went up to Paris, knowing I'd find James at the *Taverne Royale*.

"James is a real friend. Perhaps the only one in the whole of our gang. . . .

"I don't think there's any more to tell you. My wife knows all. In a way it would have been better for everybody if we'd been able to slip out of the country. The trial's going to be a painful business for everybody. . . . With three hundred thousand francs I could easily make a fresh start —in Italy, for instance, or Egypt. I'm not afraid of hard work. . . .

"But . . . but do you believe my story?"

His face clouded suddenly as the misgiving entered his mind. He had been so absorbed by what he was saying that it had not occurred to him to question its credibility.

"I believe you killed Feinstein without intending to," Maigret answered slowly and emphatically.

"You see! . . ."

"Wait a moment! What I want to know is whether Feinstein hadn't something else to blackmail you with, besides his wife's infidelity. In other words . . ."

He paused for a moment to take the little address-book out of his pocket, opening it at the letter U.

"In other words, I want to know who, some six years ago, killed a certain Ulrich, a *brocanteur* in the Rue des Blancs-Manteaux, and threw the body into the Canal Saint-Martin. . . ."

He had to make an effort to finish the sentence, so deadly was the effect of the words, so staggering, so literally staggering that Basso's hand groped instinctively for support. The only thing it found was the stove, and he quickly withdrew it with an oath.

His eyes stared into Maigret's, stared with a look of horror. Then slowly he edged backwards, step by step, till, bumping into his chair, he collapsed into it.

"My God!"

And there he sat, inert, crushed, broken, senselessly repeating:

"My God!"

The door was flung open and Madame Basso rushed in, crying wildly:

"Marcel! . . . Marcel! . . . It isn't true, is it? Say it isn't true!"

He looked back at her, not understanding, perhaps not even seeing or hearing. And suddenly there was a choke in his voice—he took his head in his hands and burst into sobs. . . .

"Daddy! . . . Daddy! . . ."

Pierrot rushed in too, adding to the general confusion.

But Basso was beyond help, beyond consolation. He simply waved them away, waved away his wife, waved away his son.

Yes, he was crushed. That was the only word for it, his back rounded, his shoulders heaving spasmodically, the tears streaming down his cheeks.

The boy cried too. Madame Basso bit her lip and glared venomously at Maigret.

And the little old Mère Mathilde, not daring to come in, stood watching by the open door. She too was crying, crying as old people cry, with little regular sobs, and wiping her eyes with the corner of her check apron.

Till at last she too entered, trotting up to her stove. Still crying and snuffling, she poked up the fire, replaced the saucepan, and brought her soup once more up to the boil.

Chapter X

MAIGRET SLIPS AWAY

SCENES of that sort cannot last long. They soon play themselves out, doubtless because the nervous system cannot remain for any length of time strung up to such a pitch. The climax is no sooner reached than its reaction sets in, and a moment later the calm is as flat as the storm was frenzied.

And with the exhaustion comes shame, shame for the tears shed, the cries uttered, as though man had no business, no right to be emotional.

Maigret waited, ill at ease, gazing out of the little window at the *gendarme's* red *képi* in the blue-grey twilight. He was at the same time dimly conscious of all that went on in the room behind him, guessing the gestures from the words spoken—Madame Basso going up to her husband, taking him by the shoulders, and in a dead, hollow voice begging once again :

"Say it isn't true. . . ."

Basso sniffed, stood up, pushed her away, and looked round him with an almost drunken stare. The top of the stove was open, throwing a circle of red light on to the oak-beamed ceiling. Mathilde put on some more coal, and then replaced her soup.

The boy looked at his father, and in unconscious imitation stopped crying too.

"I'm sorry. . . . You mustn't mind. . . . It's all over now."

The voice was toneless. He was down, licked.

"Do you confess ?"

"I've nothing to confess. . . . Listen. . . ."

He frowned as he looked at his family—a painful, wounded look.

"I didn't kill Ulrich. . . . If I broke down just now, it was because . . . because I . . ."

He hadn't even the energy to find his words.

"Because you couldn't prove your innocence."

He nodded, then repeated:

"But I didn't kill him."

"You said the same thing immediately after Feinstein's death, yet from what you've just told me . . ."

"It's not the same thing."

"You knew Ulrich, didn't you?"

A bitter smile.

"Look at the date on the fly-leaf of the address-book. Fifteen years ago. And it's something like ten since I saw Old Ulrich for the last time. . . ."

He was more composed now, though his voice betrayed the same despair.

"My father was still living then. . . . Ask anybody about my father. They'll all tell you the same thing. A strict man, hard on himself and on others. In fact, I was allowed less pocket-money than the poorest of my friends. . . . One of them gave me Old Ulrich's address in the Rue des Blancs-Manteaux. Young men who wanted a bit of money for a fling were just in his line."

"And you never knew of his death?"

Basso said nothing, and Maigret hammered out the words a second time:

"You never knew of his death? Never knew he'd been killed, then taken in a car and thrown into the Canal Saint-Martin?"

Basso still said nothing. Only, his shoulders drooped a

shade more than before. He looked at his wife, at his son, and at the old family servant, who, still crying, began automatically to lay the table because it was supper-time.

"What are you going to do?"

"I'm going to arrest you. Madame Basso and the boy can stay here or go home, whichever you prefer. . . ."

Then, opening the door, Maigret said to the *gendarme*:

"Fetch me a car."

There were two or three little groups of onlookers outside, but they kept their distance like the cautious peasants they were. When Maigret turned round, Madame Basso was in her husband's arms, the latter mechanically tapping her on the back while staring into vacancy.

"You'll look after yourself, won't you? And, above all, promise me you won't do anything foolish."

"Yes. . . ."

"You promise?"

"Yes. . . ."

"It's for your son's sake, Marcel!"

"Yes . . ." he said for the third time, with a touch of exasperation in his voice.

Perhaps it was as much as he could stand. Perhaps he was afraid of collapsing again. He broke away from her, and stood fidgeting, waiting impatiently for the car he'd heard Maigret order, in the meantime wanting only to say nothing, see nothing, and hear nothing. But he wasn't to be left in peace.

"You didn't kill that man, did you? . . . Listen, Marcel! You must listen to me. . . . For . . . for the other one, they can't possibly convict you. It was an accident, and they're bound to see it. And we can prove that Feinstein was a cad. . . . I'll get hold of a lawyer at once—somebody absolutely first-rate. . . ."

She spoke passionately. She was determined he should hear.

"Everybody knows you're an honest man. And they'll probably let you out on bail. Don't let yourself be discouraged—that's the most important thing of all. . . . And since the other . . . the other crime wasn't your doing . . ."

She threw a defiant look at Maigret.

"I'll see a lawyer tomorrow morning. . . . I'll ask Father to come over from Nancy. He'll be a great help. . . . We've got to fight this, Marcel. You're not going to give in, are you?"

She didn't realize she was hurting him, that the only effect her words could have was to sap the little strength left to him. He was struggling not to hear, focussing all his attention outside, listening for the arrival of the longed-for car.

"I'll come and see you . . . with Pierrot. . . ."

At last it came, the purr of an engine, and Maigret cut the scene short.

"Come on!"

"Remember, Marcel, you've promised. . . ."

She couldn't bear to let him go. She pushed the boy towards his father to make doubly sure of the promise she had extorted. But Basso was already going down the three steps outside the door.

Then she seized Maigret's arm, so violently that she hurt him.

"Look out!" she panted. "Look out he doesn't kill himself. I know the sort of man he is. . . ."

She caught sight of the staring onlookers and stared back boldly and shamelessly.

"Marcel! . . . Your scarf! . . ."

She fetched it from indoors, ran down the garden path and pushed it through the window just as the car was starting.

In the car, Basso breathed more freely. They were only men together now, and that made it easier. For a good ten minutes, however, neither spoke. It was not till they left the *route departmentale* and turned into the main road to Paris that Maigret said simply :

"A grand woman, that !"

"Yes. . . . She understands. . . . And to think I could risk losing her by fooling around with . . . with Mado !"

Another silence. Then he went on quietly, in a confidential tone :

"At the time, you simply don't think. . . . It's just a game, then a bit more than a game, and you haven't quite got the courage to break it off. You're afraid of a scene. . . . And this is what comes of it. . . ."

The scenery consisted of nothing but trees on either hand, which swept by in the glare of the head-lamps. Maigret filled his pipe, and passed his pouch to his companion.

"Thanks. But I only smoke cigarettes."

It was good to talk of things like that, little everyday matters.

"Go on ! I saw something like a dozen pipes in a drawer of your desk."

"Yes. . . . I used to. In fact, I was mad about pipes. But my wife didn't like it, and . . ."

Even this subject was difficult. The voice had faltered over the last sentence. Maigret hastily switched on to something else.

"Your secretary—I should think she's very devoted to you."

"She's a good sort. Yes, devoted's the word. I suppose she's fearfully upset about this ?"

"Not fearfully. She seems quite sure you'll be back before long."

They relapsed into silence again. The car was running through Juvisy. At Orly the searchlights of the aerodrome swept the sky.

"Was it you who gave Feinstein Ulrich's address?"

But Basso was on his guard at once. He didn't answer.

"Feinstein dealt with him pretty regularly. The sums are entered up in his books. At the time of the money-lender's death he owed him thirty-three thousand francs. . . ."

Basso made no response. And there was something obstinate about his silence, as though he was determined not to be drawn out.

"What is your father-in-law by profession?"

"Schoolmaster. He's in a *lycée* in Nancy. My wife was trained as a teacher too."

So the conversation ebbed and flowed, constantly approaching the danger-line and then receding into harmless small talk. At times Basso was speaking almost naturally, as though forgetting the situation he was in; at others there were sudden tense silences, heavy with unspoken misgivings.

"Your wife's quite right. You've a good chance of being acquitted as regards the Feinstein affair. At the most they couldn't give you more than a year. . . . But as for the other business . . ."

Then, abruptly turning to practical matters:

"We'll keep you for the time being in the *Police Judiciaire*, and hand you over to the *Sûreté* later on."

Maigret knocked out his pipe and slid the front window aside to say to the driver:

"Quai des Orfèvres. Drive straight into the yard."

There was no fuss, no formalities to be gone through. Maigret led Basso to the cell where Victor Gaillard had been locked up, glancing round to see that all was in order.

"Good night," he said finally. "I'll see you in the morn-

ing. You're quite sure there's nothing you want to tell me now?"

Was Basso too moved to answer? Anyhow, he merely looked down, shaking his head.

★ ★ ★ ★

Confirm arrival tomorrow morning by night train. Staying some days. Love.

It was on Wednesday morning that Maigret wired again to his wife. He was sitting at his desk at the Quai des Orfèvres, and he sent Jean out with the telegram to the post office.

A few moments later he was telephoning to the examining magistrate who was in charge of the Feinstein case.

"This evening, I hope to make you a full report on it. . . . Yes. It's all cut and dried. Culpable homicide at the most. Nothing in the least interesting. . . . Yes. . . . Very well, then, I'll come round this evening."

He went into the next room, where he found Lucas writing up a report.

"How about Victor?"

"Dubois relieved me. . . . I'm just making out the report. . . . I told you he was working at the Salvation Army place. Well, he seemed to be settling down to it in earnest. He'd talked about his lungs, of course, so they were full of consideration. No doubt they looked upon him as a sure recruit. In fact, I was getting quite used to the idea of seeing him in a month's time in a uniform with a red collar. . . ."

"And then?"

"It didn't last long. Yesterday evening one of the officers arrived in the place and told him to do something. I don't know what it was, but evidently it was something Victor hadn't bargained for. He refused, and kicked up the deuce

of a shindy, saying it was disgraceful to make a one-lunged man work like a navvy. . . . They asked him to go, but he wouldn't, and then of course they chucked him out. Quite a pretty little scuffle. . . . He spent the night under the Pont-Marie. When Dubois took over, he was wandering along the quays. . . . Dubois will be ringing up at lunch-time to keep you informed. . . ."

"I shan't be here, so when he does will you give him a message? Tell him to bring Victor round here and lock him up in the same cell he was in before, *with the man that's there now.*"

"Right!"

At the door, Maigret turned round.

"By the way! You can tell Janvier not to bother about Lola."

"Lola?"

"Yes. He'll know. Tell him I don't think we shall want her after all."

He went home, fished out some country clothes, and packed his bag. He had lunch in a *brasserie* near the Place de la République, where he also called for a time-table to make sure of his train, the 12.10 from the Gare de l'Est.

He sat on for a long time after the meal, reading newspapers, then walked, or rather dawdled about, filling in the time till five o'clock, when he punctually took his customary seat at the *Taverne Royale*. He had not been there many minutes when James joined him, holding out his hand, looking round for the waiter, and asking:

"Pernod?"

"*Ma foi!* . . ."

"Waiter! Two Pernods!"

James sat down, crossed his legs, and sighed, staring in

front of him like a man who has nothing to say, nor even anything to think. The sky was grey. Unexpected gusts of wind swept along the streets, blowing up clouds of dust.

"We'll be having another storm," sighed James.

Then, without any transition:

"Is it true—what the papers say? Have you really arrested Basso?"

"Yesterday afternoon."

"Here's how! It's absurd. . . ."

"What is?"

"The way he's behaved. Look at him! A substantial, respectable man with every reason to feel sure of himself. And then to go and lose his head like a child. I thought for a moment he might have some reason. But obviously he'd have done far better to stand his ground and face the music."

So James was taking the same line as Madame Basso. Somehow Maigret couldn't help smiling.

"Here's how! . . . You may be right, but you may equally be wrong. It all depends. . . ."

"What do you mean? You're not going to tell me that Basso meant to kill Feinstein, are you? And if he didn't mean to, you can't, by any stretch, call it a crime."

"I quite agree. That is, if he's nothing on his conscience besides Feinstein's death. But . . ."

And with startling abruptness he called out:

"Waiter! How much is that?"

"Six francs fifty."

"Are you going?"

"Yes. I've got to see Basso."

"Ah!"

"For that matter . . . if you'd like to come too, I'll take

you along with me. . . . You'd like to see him, wouldn't you?"

Nothing was said in the taxi till they were half-way there. Then James asked:

"How did Madame Basso take it?"

"She's a remarkable woman. Any amount of pluck. And it seems she's cultured too. I never suspected it, seeing her at Morsang in sailor clothes. . . . And how's your wife?"

"Very well, thanks. Just as usual."

"She hasn't been worried by all this trouble?"

"Why should she be? . . . Besides, she's not really the worrying sort. She's generally thinking about the housework or her sewing, or what she's going to buy in the sales. . . ."

"Here we are. Come along with me."

He led James across the yard. Coming to the man on guard outside the cell, he asked:

"Are they both there?"

"Yes."

"Quiet?"

"The one Dubois brought in made a bit of a row, talking about his rights, and saying he'd get his case taken up by some society or other."

Maigret hardly smiled. Opening the door, he pushed James in in front of him.

* * * *

There was only one bed in the cell, of which Victor had taken possession, having first discarded his jacket and shoes. Basso was walking up and down with his hands behind his back. For a second he glanced enquiringly at James, then his eyes shifted to Maigret.

As for Victor Gaillard, he raised himself, scowled, then lay down again, muttering unintelligibly.

"Glad to see you, James . . ." said Basso, offering his hand.

It was meant to be cordial. But there was something wrong, though it was difficult to say what. Something unexpressed which nevertheless cast a chill over the atmosphere, and which perhaps made Maigret think that what he wanted was not going to come of itself.

Anyhow, he decided to come straight to the point.

"Gentlemen," he said, "I must ask you to sit down, for I've something to say which may take a little time. . . . Here, you! Make room on the bed. And just see if you can't go a quarter of an hour without coughing. It won't be any use to you here."

Victor contented himself with a supercilious grin, like a man who's biding his time.

"Sit down, James. You too, Monsieur Basso. . . . That's better. . . . If you'll listen to me, I'll try to sum up the situation as concisely as possible. Now, if you're quite ready. . . .

"A few months ago a man called Lenoir was sentenced to death. I saw him the day before his execution, and he told me about a certain crime. He mentioned no names—except the Christian name of our friend here—and he would never have said what he did if he'd thought it could give anybody away.

"Six years ago a car drove off from a house in Paris and stopped by the Canal Saint-Martin. The driver then left his seat, fished a corpse out of the back of his car, and threw it into the water.

"A crime whose very simplicity left no trace, and nothing would ever have been known of it if there hadn't been two witnesses, two crooks whose names were Lenoir and Victor

Gaillard, who accompanied him the whole way on the back of the car.

"Being the sort they were, they didn't come to the police. They preferred to turn their knowledge into hard cash for themselves. So they called on the driver of the car and squeezed him periodically, for as much as they dared ask.

"But they were new to the game and did not take sufficient precautions. One day their victim had moved, without leaving an address behind him.

"That's all as far as the crime's concerned, except that the body was that of a Jewish *brocanteur* called Ulrich, who was really a money-lender."

The inspector slowly lit his pipe without looking at the others. Nor did he look at them in the conversation that followed, except now and again when he snapped at Victor.

"Six years later, quite by chance, Lenoir came across the murderer. But he had no opportunity to renew business dealings, for another crime he had committed sent him to the guillotine.

"But listen to this. . . . Before his execution he talked to me about the murder. He didn't say a great deal, but it was just enough to give me a useful hint. And before his death he managed to send word to Victor to announce his discovery. At this news, Victor promptly left his sanatorium and hastened to the *Guinguette à Deux Sous*.

"Which brings us to the second act. . . . No, James, don't interrupt me. Nor you either, Victor.

"On the Sunday of Feinstein's death, Ulrich's murderer was at the *Guinguette*. It might have been you, Basso, or you, James, or Feinstein himself, or even one of the others. Someone was there who was recognized by Victor. . . .

"And Victor's the only one who can tell us who it was."

The latter opened his mouth to speak, and Maigret literally shouted :

"Silence !"

Then, in the same quiet tone as before, he went on :

"But it happens that this Victor, besides being a dirty little toad, is a shrewd little fox. He also has the advantage of having only one lung—but we'll let that pass. . . . Anyhow, he has no intention of giving anything away for nothing. His price is thirty thousand francs, or to be quite precise, twenty-five thousand. That's his lowest figure. . . . *Silence, sacrebleu !* Will you let me finish ? . . .

"The police is not accustomed to doling out sums of that magnitude, and we've no way of putting pressure on a one-lunged man. . . .

"I said just now that it might have been one of three present, or any of the others. But that's not to say that everybody is equally suspicious. For instance, we know that Basso knew Ulrich at one time and had dealings with him. The same of Feinstein, only in his case we know still more—that at the time of the money-lender's death he owed him thirty-three thousand francs, a debt which lapsed with the murder.

"Feinstein's dead. Enough has come to light to show he was a distinctly undesirable person. If he killed Ulrich, that closes the case. . . .

"But did he ? . . . Victor could tell us in a second, but I'm not in a position to pay him twenty-five thousand for the information. . . .

"*Silence, sacrebleu !* . . . You can hold your tongue until you're spoken to."

Victor was fidgeting all the time. He was simply dying to get a word in.

Maigret looked at the floor. He had been speaking in a dull, monotonous voice, almost as if he'd been reciting a lesson.

Suddenly he jumped up and made for the door, muttering:

"Just a moment! I must ring somebody up. I'll be back in a moment."

His steps faded away in the distance.

Chapter XI

THE SETTLEMENT

MAIGRET sat at his desk telephoning. He had the examining magistrate at the other end of the line.

"Yes, *Monsieur le juge*," he said finally, "within the next ten minutes or so. . . . Who? . . . I tell you, I don't know yet. . . . No, it's not a joke. Am I in the habit of pulling your leg? . . ."

He rang off, walked two or three times up and down his room, then went up to Jean.

"I'm catching the 12.10 tonight and shan't be back for a few days. Here's my address."

Several times he looked at his watch, finally leaving the room and going downstairs to the cell where he had left the three men boxed up together.

The first thing he saw as he went in was Victor, with fury and discomfiture written all over his face. He was no longer sitting on the bed, but raging up and down the cell. Basso was still sitting where Maigret had left him, only now he was holding his head between his hands.

As for James, he was standing with his arms folded, leaning against the wall, while he looked at Maigret with a strange smile.

"I'm sorry to keep you waiting. I . . ."

"It's all over," broke in James. "It would have been anyhow. Your absence wasn't necessary."

His smile grew still stranger as Maigret lost countenance.

"Victor Gaillard won't earn his twenty-five thousand either

by talking or holding his tongue. . . . It was I who killed Old Ulrich."

The inspector opened the door and called the policeman who was on guard outside.

"Take this man away"—he pointed at Victor—"and shut him up anywhere you like till I've finished here."

But the wretch could not resign himself to failure.

"Don't forget who put you on Ulrich's track," he whined. "Without that, where would you be? . . . And it's well worth . . ."

Maigret no longer wanted to bash his face in, Victor's futile obstinacy was now merely pitiable.

"Five thousand," Victor shouted over his shoulder as he was dragged away.

* * * *

And so they were left, the three men, in the special cell of the *Police Judiciaire*. Of the three, Basso was by far the most upset. He remained sitting where he was during a silence that must have lasted a full minute. Then he rose to his feet and, standing before Maigret, said:

"Please don't think I'd have let him down, Inspector. I'd have given the twenty-five thousand willingly. What's twenty-five thousand to me compared to . . .? But James wouldn't let me. . . ."

Maigret looked from one to the other. He too was upset. Somehow the scene wasn't at all what he'd pictured. With the surprise that was plainly written on his face was also a sympathy that was almost affectionate.

"I suppose you knew, Basso?"

"All along," murmured the coal-merchant. Then James explained:

"It was Basso who gave me the money to keep them quiet. Of course I had to tell him everything. . . ."

"And after all these years to chuck up the sponge for a matter of twenty-five thousand!"

"It's not that. . . . You can't understand, nor the inspector either."

His eye wandered, as though looking for something.

"Has anybody got a fag?"

Basso held out his cigarette-case.

"No Pernod, I'm afraid. Never mind! I shall have to get used to that. All the same, it would have made things easier."

His lips moved like those of a drinker tormented by his craving.

"There isn't a lot to be said. . . . I was comfortably married and leading the same quiet little life as anybody else. Then I ran into Mado, and like a fool I thought the great moment had come. Just like a novelette. *My life for a kiss. Live dangerously.* And all the rest. My quiet little life seemed merely squalid."

The phlegmatic and slightly contemptuous way he spoke made his confession sound almost unreal, inhuman. But then James looked like a clown, anyhow.

"I was just at the right age to get it badly. Secret meetings in a secret room. Cakes and glasses of port in *pâtisseries.* And there was nothing cheap about it—at least, not to a clerk earning a thousand francs a month. Of course I didn't dare let on to Mado that I couldn't afford it."

"I was caught. And instead of breaking free, I simply plunged in all the deeper, just as millions have before me. Not a very original story. The only amusing thing about it is that it was my lover's husband who gave me Ulrich's address."

"Did you borrow a lot?"

"Less than seven thousand. But that's quite enough when

a chap's only earning a thousand a month. . . Then one night Ulrich came to see me. My wife was at Vendôme at her sister's. He said if I couldn't pay back the loans I must at any rate pay the interest on them. If I didn't, he'd go to my employers and tell them—and also put the bailiffs on me."

James still spoke in the same calm, disdainful tone.

"That meant the end of everything. I saw red. As a matter of fact, I only wanted to frighten him, but as soon as I hit him he tried to call for help. Then I took him by the throat. . . . All the same, I was as cool and collected as could be. It's a great mistake to think one necessarily loses one's head at such moments. I did nothing of the kind. In fact, I doubt if I've ever been more lucid in my life. . . . I went out and hired a car, pinching some of the tools to put into Ulrich's pockets. Then I carried him down as though he was a drunk, talking to him as I went. . . . You know the rest."

He took a hand out of his pocket, then stuffed it back again. He had almost reached out automatically for the glass that wasn't there!

"That's all. . . . After a thing like that, life looks different. The Mado affair dragged on for another month or so. My wife got into the habit of going at me for drinking—for that's when I started. . . .

"And then the two crooks who started squeezing me . . . I couldn't pay them, any more than I could pay Ulrich his interest. The only person I could turn to was Basso, so I went and told him the whole story. . . . They say it does you good to confess, but, believe me, all that's just story-book stuff. Nothing does any good. The only thing that could do any good would be to begin all over again. Right from the start. Right from the cradle."

The words sounded so incongruous in James' drawling,

disdainful voice, that Maigret couldn't help smiling. And he noticed that they brought a faint smile even to Basso's distraught face.

"Stupid, wasn't it? Only, it would have been stupider still to go round to the police station and say you'd killed a man."

"So you just bottled it up," said Maigret. "And looked round for some place you could call your own. . . ."

"One has to get through life somehow. . . ."

A hopeless story. An endless stretch of dreary desolation that lacked the climax of a real tragedy. But James didn't want it to be tragic. He made it a point of honour to remain simple and matter-of-fact whatever happened. Nor was this a pose—just a natural distaste for giving way to feelings.

In the end, he was much the calmest of the three, and his quizzical eye seemed to be wondering what on earth there was to be so troubled about.

"Really, men are fools! To think that Basso should go and put his head in a noose too! And with Mado of all people! Yes, it had to be Mado!

"If I'd had a chance I'd have said I killed Feinstein myself. There'd have been some use in that. And it would . . . it would have settled things. . . . But as luck would have it, I had an inspector of the *Police Judiciaire* to witness that I didn't . . .

"And of course Basso did the worst thing possible. He bunked. . . . I did what I could to help. . . ."

There was, after all, a little quaver in James' voice, and it was only after a long pause that he went on in the same monotonous drawl as before:

"He ought to have told the truth straight away. But he has a genius for getting in a mess. Just now he wanted to give Victor his twenty-five thousand."

"It would have been the best way out," growled Basso. "Now . . ."

"Now we've got things settled for good and all. I wash my hands of everything. Of this pettifogging existence, of the bank, of the *Taverne Royale*, of . . ."

He broke off. He had nearly said:

". . . of my wife."

Of the wife with whom he had nothing in common. Of the little studio-like flat in the Rue Championnet to which he'd return shortly after eight each day, to while away the evening dipping idly into any book that came to hand, with her sewing in the opposite corner.

"This way," he went on, "this way I shall be left in peace."

In prison. Or in a convict settlement. Another place to call his own!

A place where things would be settled once and for all. No longer anything to hide, nor anything to expect. A place where he would keep regular hours, getting up, going to bed, having meals, breaking stones by the roadside or making knick-knacks in the prison workshops.

"I suppose it'll be twenty years, won't it?"

Basso looked at him. But he could hardly see him for the tears that were welling up in his eyes and rolling down his cheeks.

"Stop it, James! Stop it!" he pleaded, wringing his hands.

"Why should I?"

Maigret blew his nose, then absent-mindedly lit a match to light his pipe, forgetting that he had not filled it.

He had the feeling he had never been so far along the dreary road of desolation and black despair.

No, not even black! An endless stretch of greyness, devoid of all struggle, all resentment, unbroken by either protest or complaint.

A drunkard's despair, but without intoxication.

And suddenly Maigret understood the nature of the bond between him and James, the bond which had kept them hour after hour side by side on the terrace of the *Taverne Royale.*

They had drunk their Pernods, saying little, staring out at the passing traffic. And all the time, in his heart of hearts, James had been hoping that his companion would one day bring his heavy hand down on his shoulder, the heavy hand of the law which settled everything!

He had loved Maigret as a friend and a deliverer. Once again Maigret had been called to the rescue.

* * * *

Maigret and Basso exchanged glances, unfathomable glances. Meanwhile James squashed the end of his cigarette on the top of the deal table, saying:

"The trouble is, it takes so long to get there. Endless questioning and writing out statements. . . . Then the trial. . . . People who break down or try to console you. . . ."

A detective opened the door.

"The examining magistrate's here," he announced.

Maigret hesitated, not knowing quite how to deal with the situation. But James came up to him and took him by the arm.

"Look here," he said. "Do me a good turn, will you? Ask him to push it through as quickly as he can. I'll confess anything he likes, so long as they send me off to my little corner as speedily as possible."

And to finish off on the right note, he deliberately went on:

"The chap I'm sorry for is the waiter at the *Taverne Royale.* He'll miss me all right. But perhaps you'll take my place from time to time, Inspector. . . ."